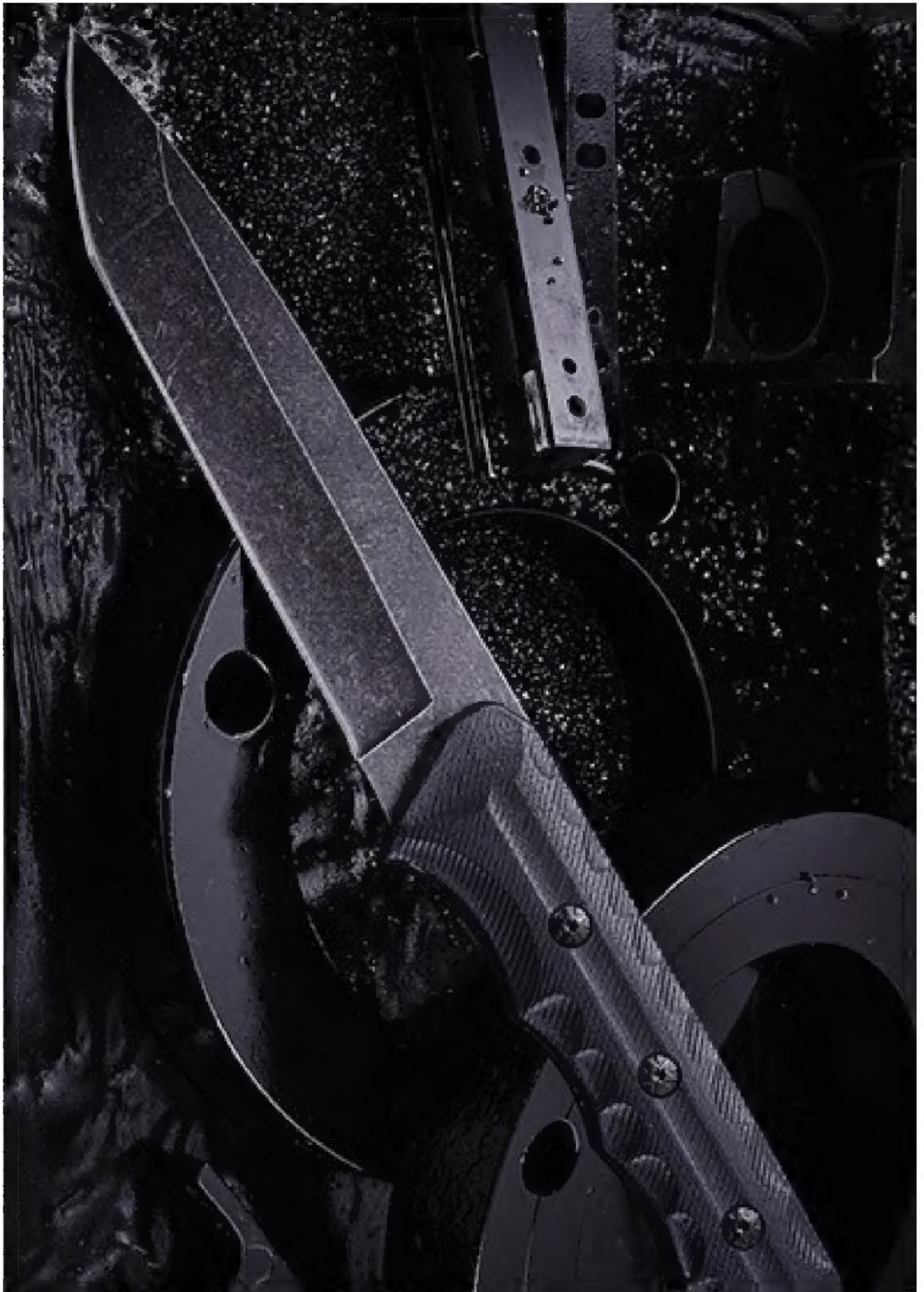


Don't Forgive Me

brightened



Chapter 1

January 1964

Playful shouts pinged back and forth between children as the sky filled with colorful diamonds. The wind whipped the kites harshly, sending them weaving and spinning.

Sirius Black pushed up onto the tips of his toes and spread his fingers against the railing. It was coarse under his palms as he strained to look down into the village. The shouts were little more than echoes to him and he made out the kites only as black flecks against a clear blue sky.

Briefly he contemplated clambering over and dropping down onto the soft dirt outside the walls of the villa. Then he remembered doing the same a few days prior, being found by his mother, and getting dragged home with his hair fisted in her hand.

Rubbing his head at the memory, Sirius gave up on getting a better view of the festival. He turned and sagged against the pink sandstone before tilting his head to watch the specks, squinting and pretending he could make out vibrant shades.

A high pitched chattering tore through the quiet of the balcony. Sirius turned to the source with a grin.

"Knew you'd come back!" he said cheerfully as three gray langur monkeys loped across the railing, climbing over and around each other as they moved. The smallest one darted forward and came to a stop on Sirius's shoulder. "Hold on, hold on. I have it somewhere."

Sirius searched his pockets. He pulled out a yo-yo, a fanged frisbee missing two teeth, and an empty phial with a crack running down the middle.

"Ha!" he cried in triumph when he located the small drawstring pouch. The monkeys startled at the noise and scurried back, clinging to each other. They quickly came forward again when Sirius dumped the contents of the pouch into his palm and stretched out his hand.

They snatched scant fistfuls of the corn kernels before retreating slightly and gnawing away. Sirius settled down on the slab floor and propped his head with his hands to watch their sharp little teeth make quick work of the corn.

The sound of sandals slapping against tile interrupted the peace. Regulus bounded through the nearest scalloped archway, a half-eaten samosa in one hand and a scribbled drawing in the other. The trio of langurs darted away, scattering corn kernels in their wake.

"Look!" Regulus said. He shoved the paper at Sirius. "I drew Mummy and Papa and Kreacher and you and me."

"It's just scribbles," Sirius said dismissively. He pushed the paper back. "And you scared away the monkeys."

Regulus looked from the scrunched paper to Sirius and back again. An exaggerated pout settled on his lips. "You're mean," he said and launched the samosa at Sirius.

Sirius ducked and it smacked the sandstone, leaving a greasy print behind. "Oooh," Sirius taunted. "You're gonna get in trouble."

"Boys?" their mother called from the cavernous halls. She stepped out onto the balcony in a swirl of white robe, golden anklets clinking with each step. Her black hair was braided and pulled over her shoulder, ending in a point at her hip. "Are we arguing?"

"No," Sirius and Regulus said at once. Sirius edged over to hide the grease stain and Regulus thrust out his drawing once again.

"Look what I made!"

"Beautiful," Walburga said. She bent closer to inspect the picture and touched a mass of green squiggles. "That's Kreacher, of course."

Regulus beamed. "Yes! And that's you, Mummy." He pointed to a pink circle with two dots for eyes.

"I love it. May I have it?" she asked, holding out her hand, and Regulus happily passed it over. "Thank you, Regulus. Now, who wants to go on a magic carpet ride?"

"Me!" Regulus cried, bouncing up and down. "Me, me, me!"

Sirius looked back over at the ceaselessly moving specks. He could just catch some peals of laughter. What he really wanted was to join the kite festival.

When he returned his gaze to his mother, he found her frowning at him. "I do too," he said hastily, stepping forward.

Walburga looked at the kites briefly and then back to her son. "Let's be on our way then," she said, chillier than before, and walked off with Regulus clinging to her hand.

November 1966

The house elves of the Black villa scurried around the kitchen. Lentils boiled in stainless steel pots, fragrant sauces simmered in wide pans, and one elf stood over a sizzling vat of oil, frying bhujia by the basket.

Sirius ducked into the bustling room and strode over to an overflowing serving bowl of baati. He picked one up and stuffed the entire thing in his mouth, chewing vigorously.

"What is Master Black doing?" Beest asked nervously. Her eyes darted between his furiously working mouth and the vat of lassi she was blending magically by swirling her hand over the mixture.

"Papa's going to kill me," Sirius said after swallowing the bread. He moved over to the cooled bhujia and began shoving pieces into his mouth. "I'm enjoying my last meal."

The elves exchanged frightened glances, trying to decide wordlessly how to approach the situation. Before they reached a consensus, Orion swept through the archway and glowered down at his son.

"Sirius."

"Yes, Papa?" he asked innocently. He wiped his oily hands in the back of his robes and left grease streaks visible in the black fabric.

"I don't remember giving you permission to leave."

"You didn't," Sirius agreed. "It was an act of self-preservation."

Orion's mouth, set in a firm line beneath features twisted in disapproval, twitched. "You've been reading your mother's novels again."

"Not much else to do," Sirius grumbled and crossed his arms over his chest. "Alright. I'm ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Whatever you're going to do to me."

Orion crouched before his son and held both of his hands. "I'm not going to do anything to you, silly child. But you will be going to Alphard's funeral. He always liked you and he left you a lot of money. It would be uncouth for you to skip his viewing."

"I don't need money. I'm going to take all of yours." Orion's expression did not soften. "Fine, fine. Lead the way, Papa."

Sirius grabbed another baati on the way out and a wooden ladle from beside a saucepan. He stowed both in his pockets next to a peacock feather, which he'd found on the ground, and one of his mother's rings, which he'd slipped out of her jewelry box.

The viewing was well underway by the time Sirius shuffled in, eyes downcast. They had so many relatives that they seemed to be dying constantly, necessitating a trip to Jaipur and lots of boring stuffy conversation each time. The pyre was kind of fun, if he ignored what was burning, and the food was always good but the benefits paled in comparison to the inevitable boredom.

Plus the crying. There was so much crying.

After a short while, Orion nudged Sirius over to the body where it laid on a wooden platform. Then he turned and went to speak to some cousin about some dumb thing.

Sirius stood alone and stared down at his Uncle Alphard. He could have easily been sleeping. The preservation spells kept his eyes closed and the skin around his mouth smooth. His arms were crossed over his chest and his fingers were curled over his wand, a slim rod of cypress.

Sirius felt that funny feeling strike him, the one that itched his fingers and narrowed his world down to the object he wanted in that moment. He was too entranced to even glance around to check if he was being watched. He tugged the wand free from his uncle's staged grip and stuck it into one of his pockets. Then, without really planning to, he pulled the ladle out and tucked it where the wand had been, hiding the spoon beneath Alphard's arms.

Sirius stepped away and it was only a few minutes later that Orion, Arcturus, Pollux, and Cygnus descended upon Alphard's body. They lifted the wooden bed he rested upon and carried it through the villa and out to the pyre.

Jets of flame shot from dozens of wands. Sirius watched with a distracted gaze, his mind elsewhere. He pictured himself walking into Hogwarts after years of having his own wand and having practiced magic whenever he wanted. He'd be better than any first year before him. Thinking that, even standing behind a mourning crowd, he had to fight to keep a smile off his face.

July 1969

Murmurs drifted from Orion's study as Sirius snuck past it, Regulus on his heels. He resumed a

normal posture as they stepped through the front door and onto the paved brick driveway.

“What if they notice we’re not in our rooms?” Regulus asked with an anxious look back towards the closed door.

Sirius kept a brisk pace, forcing Regulus to jog to keep up. “You ask that every time.” Sirius didn’t bother to hide his irritation. “Why don’t you go back inside if you’re so worried about it?”

“Cause I want my chocolate frog,” Regulus said as they turned a corner.

“Don’t have one.” Sirius walked even faster.

“Then I’m going home!” Regulus stopped, turned on his heel, and then spun back around to face his brother. “How do I get home?”

Sirius laughed and took off running. Regulus scrambled to keep up but Sirius’s legs were longer and his glee at such an impulsive action spurred him on.

Eventually he turned a corner quick enough that Regulus wasn’t behind him. He came to a stop in the Muggle park they visited as frequently as Sirius could get away with. He stood still, catching his breath, and a movement caught his eyes.

A boy crawled out from beneath an azalea bush across the street. He was pale and the bags around his eyes hinted at total exhaustion. He looked startled to see Sirius and then pleased; he crossed the street and stopped on the mulch.

“Why were you down there?” Sirius asked. The boy shrugged.

“Sirius?” Ugh. He hadn’t escaped Regulus after all. The younger boy came running around the corner and then stood next to Sirius, grabbing a fistful of his robes. “Sirius, let’s go, you can’t talk to one of them.” He pouted, as always, and his whiny tone grated on Sirius’s nerves.

“I’m not a Muggle,” the boy blurted. Sirius felt a thrill of interest as he swept his eyes over the boy again. They’d certainly never met him and he wore Muggle clothes - jeans, Sirius was pretty sure they were called, and a shirt so large it hung down like a tunic.

“You’re not?” Sirius asked. “Why are you dressed so funny then?”

“Me?” The boy suddenly looked close to tears but angrily, like he’d cry and punch Sirius at the time. “What are you wearing?”

“Robes,” Sirius answered. “Don’t you wear them?”

The boy shrugged again. Regulus tugged on Sirius’s robes where he held them.

“I’m going home,” he announced. “And I won’t lie if Mummy asks where you are.”

“Go on then.” Sirius watched Regulus scurry off and knew with a swooping certainty he was going to be punished for leaving the house. They might even set up wards to trap him in the house as they had when he was a toddler; he had vague memories of running full force at the open door only to be tossed backward into the house.

Well. If he was going to be punished, he might as well make it a worthwhile crime. Maybe if this boy was someone of import, his parents would be more forgiving.

He turned back to the boy who watched him with distrusting eyes, partially covered by the choppy

black hair that curtained his face. "Who are your parents?"

"Stop asking me questions," he snapped.

"What's your name?" Sirius couldn't help but smile; needling people was one of his favorite pastimes. "How old are you?"

"You're a freak," the boy muttered.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not!" Sirius extended one hand. He knew exactly one bit of wandless magic, which had taken the better part of a year to figure out and half the time still didn't work. Hoping this would be a successful attempt, he concentrated very hard on his palm, visualizing a flower blooming from the skin. After a moment, a green stem shot up and a flower unfurled in his palm. He grinned at his own triumph. "Would a freak do that?"

"Absolutely."

"Fair point," Sirius said, laughing, and crushed the flower within his fist. "I'm Sirius Black."

"Severus," was all he said. No surname given. He had to be of poor blood, then. Sirius shoved away the disappointment that he wouldn't be able to soften his parents. He'd never talked to a half-blood before. He felt a sting of curiosity as he looked over Severus once more.

"Our names kind of match," Sirius said. "I'm named after a star, what about you?"

An hour later they sat cross-legged in the mulch, chattering easily back and forth. Sirius found out he'd been right about Severus's parentage and that he went to a Muggle school, which Sirius found terribly exciting. He asked if they flew kites at his school and Severus looked at him like he'd sprouted horns.

"My mum will have my head," Sirius said eventually, looking up at the darkening sky. "I wasn't supposed to leave at all and I've been gone hours."

He looked back at Severus and for the first time that funny feeling thrummed through him looking not at an object but a person. He wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be Severus's friend. It would be the best thing he'd ever pull over on his parents.

"Can you meet same day next week?" Sirius asked. "I'll find a way to sneak out again. I always do."

Severus agreed and then they split off in opposite directions. Sirius had explored the way Severus went before. He remembered houses with broken windows, fences with missing boards, cracked pavement, and giant rusted things he thought were called cars.

When he slipped back in his house, he found his family and some guests seated at the dinner table. His spot was plated so he settled in. He spooned rice and kadhi onto his dish and ate silently as the adult conversation swirled around him.

That night, Orion came to him in his room. Sirius, nestled into his cushy armchair, looked up from the book he was reading and flashed a smile, hoping he didn't look as nervous as he felt.

“Did you have fun this afternoon?” Orion asked.

“Yes. I played in the park.”

“Regulus was quite distraught you left him behind.” Orion squatted before Sirius and their dark brown eyes met. “You are getting older, Sirius, and in no time at all you’ll be off at Hogwarts. Your mother and I can’t always tell you what to do. But you need to remember your brother. He’s the family you will have long after we have gone on. You both are responsible for our bloodline, our legacy.”

Sirius felt an unpleasant twisting inside at the thought of that, of his mother’s body being the one so unnaturally still, of his father’s body on the pyre. He set the book aside and tossed his arms around his father’s neck, squeezing until Orion laughed and pried his arms off.

Walburga came later, after he’d tucked himself in. She stood in the doorway, illuminated by the hallway light, and watched him without a word. He turned away, put one of his many pillows over his face, and eventually fell asleep.

Chapter 2

September 1969

Sirius dragged the trash can below the window he knew to be Severus's and climbed on top of it. He knocked on the closed window and when it didn't open he knocked again, twice as hard. The sash flew up and Severus's head poked out to glare at Sirius. "He'll hear you," he hissed.

"Then let me in."

Severus disappeared and Sirius took that as an invitation. He grabbed the windowsill and hauled his body up and through the opening.

It was nighttime; his parents thought he was asleep in his bed. Earlier that day Severus had missed their weekly catch up for the second time and Sirius had decided to do something about it.

"Where've you been?" Sirius asked, ready to launch into an indignant rant, and then Severus crossed the room to sit on his bed and the moonlight fell across his face.

"Here," Severus answered sullenly in the exact moment Sirius's stomach swooped at the state of his friend's face.

"What happened to you?" Sirius crossed the room and took Severus by the chin, trying to inspect the cuts and bruises marking his face. Severus flinched and pulled away. His eyes darted around the room, looking anywhere but at Sirius.

"Fell," he said unconvincingly.

"No. Looks like you got into a fight. Someone at school?" His parents always said Muggles were violent. Sirius felt a twitch of excitement at the thought. He wondered briefly if Severus could get the Muggle to fight him too. But the next words erased the thought from his mind.

"It was my Pa."

"What?" Sirius looked over Severus and saw then how bruises splattered his forearms, dark stains against pale skin. "Your dad did that to you? Why?"

Severus laughed bitterly. "He's drunk. He's bored. He hates me. Pick a reason." Severus did meet his gaze then. "I've never told anyone that before."

Sirius didn't know what to say. Of course he'd been punished before. His parents had never left a mark and this wasn't a single handprint but Severus's entire body damaged. Looking at the bruises, Sirius worried that he might be sick. He wasn't much for hiding his emotions but he did his best to keep his face calm for once.

"I have to wait for all this to go away." Severus waved his hand by his face.

"I'll be back tomorrow night," Sirius said. "I can't do magic at your house but I'll bring something that will heal everything faster."

There was a noise from downstairs, some kind of thump Sirius couldn't identify, and Severus stiffened. "You'd better go," he said quietly.

Sirius nodded and left. He spent the walk home in a sort of stupor, thinking about his friend and the things his father had done to him.

The next morning Sirius came downstairs and found his parents eating breakfast in the dining room. He threw his arms around both of their necks, pulling their heads together as he hugged them. He felt his mother stiffen at the touch and normally it would bother him but compared to Severus's dad...

He hugged them and, though the gratitude was fleeting, for the first time in his life he was thankful to be a Black.

November 1969

The knife in Sirius's hand slid smoothly through the cake. He cut a generous slice and lifted it onto a small plate, smearing fudge icing on the side of his hand in the process.

He first brought it to Orion, who smiled warmly at the honor as his fork scraped against the ceramic. Orion ate his single bite and Sirius continued to Walburga, who smiled too but a bit tightly, and Regulus, who broke off a rather larger than typical piece.

Orion cut and served the rest of the cake as Sirius moved around the table, offering the slice to the rest of his family in descending age. All of his grandparents were in attendance, Arcturus and Melania on Orion's side and Pollux and Irma on Walburga's. His Aunt Lucretia was home sick with a mild case of Owl Flu but Uncle Cygnus was there and his children too, except the one cousin Sirius would have actually liked to see.

"She's marrying a Mudblood," Walburga said sharply the morning of the party, when Sirius asked why Andromeda's nameplate wasn't at the dining table. "She's no longer a member of our family. Don't ever mention her again."

It was that simple for his mother, perhaps, but not for him. He wished she was there, to muss his hair in a way that somehow wasn't annoying and to soundly beat him in Gobstones.

Sirius ate the last bite of the cake himself and then returned to his seat. He handed the plate, smeared with frosting and coated in crumbs, to Kreacher.

"You always pick chocolate," Regulus observed. "I'm getting strawberry at my birthday."

"Maybe you should skip the cake." Sirius poked Regulus's stomach. The younger boy jumped and Sirius reached again, only to be blocked by his hands. Regulus tried to launch his own attack but Sirius elbowed him away at the forearm.

"Boys." Walburga's soft voice cut through the light chatter filling the room. "Enough."

Regulus turned back to his plate instantly but Sirius met his mother's stern gaze. "I can't play with my brother, now?"

"Listen to your mother," Orion said. Sirius grimaced.

"I won't when she's being stupid."

His father's hand was on him before his mother's face finished flushing. He pulled Sirius from the room without a word. Sirius yanked his arm free once they were alone in the hallway.

Orion pointed to his study. "In."

Sirius sat in one of the leather armchairs in the room but quickly jumped out of it when his father prodded him with his wand, sending a short shock through him.

"What-?"

"Don't speak." Orion sat behind his desk. He rubbed his chin as he looked at Sirius, standing and shifting his weight between his feet. "That was unacceptable, Sirius. At any time and especially in front of guests. Your mother works tirelessly for this family-"

"Does she?" Sirius asked, feeling reckless. "Blasting people off the family tree and ordering house elves around, that doesn't sound too hard to me."

Orion pointed his wand and the shock went through him again. It was slightly longer and noticeably more powerful.

"Hold your tongue before I hold it for you." Orion rarely showed anger but now his face contorted with it. Survival instincts kept Sirius's mouth shut for the rest of the lecture but inwardly he mocked or ignored everything his father had to say.

"Yes, sir," he said flatly at the conclusion of the rant. He followed Orion out of the study and back to the dining room where the party had progressed without him. Dessert was replaced with dinner - sweets came first on birthdays - and no one seemed to have noticed or cared about his absence. Bellatrix and Narcissa admired the diamond ring on Bellatrix's finger while Arcturus and Pollux discussed the newly passed werewolf legislation.

When the meal was finished, Sirius opened his presents: robes, extravagant jewelry, a sherwani, and juttis. Orion gathered it all up and when Sirius went to bed that night his new things weren't in his room as tradition dictated.

The next morning, Regulus shuffled downstairs looking quite unhappy, dressed in Sirius's new clothes. Walburga accompanied him, a loose hand on his shoulder. Sirius looked from his brother to his mother.

"Do you think that bothers me?" he asked her. The peculiar tightness in his chest told him it did.

She swept past him and into the next room without answering. Regulus looked at him guiltily and then down at his feet.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." Sirius knocked his shoulder into his brother's. "She's mad."

Sirius fetched a pair of utility scissors from the kitchen and brought them to his room. He spent the morning shredding holes in all his clothes. He would get his new clothes or his mother would spend hours repairing his old ones. Either way, he won.

He hesitated when he got to the pair of jeans Andromeda sent him the week before as an early birthday present. After a moment, he continued on, hacking into the denim. The problem with pretending to not care was that there had to be no limits on what he would do to prove it.

June 1970

“Wingardium Leviosa.”

“It’s not working.”

“Give it a minute!” Severus said. He glared at Sirius as he readjusted his grip on Uncle Alphard’s wand and pointed it once again at the sealed inkwell on Sirius’s desk. “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The inkwell shook, lifted half a meter in the air, and dropped unceremoniously to the carpet. Severus huffed and shoved the wand back at Sirius.

“You won’t be good at every spell right away. I still can’t figure out mending.”

Severus shrugged and flopped down onto Sirius’s bed. His socked feet hung off the edge, a toe poking out from one hole and his heel exposed from another.

“Why don’t we-”

The door flung open and Regulus bounded in, hands cupped together. “Look what I found!” he cried and let go. Something popped out from behind his fingers. It zipped around the room in a streak of glowing scarlet.

“A Flitterby?” Sirius asked scornfully. As he spoke, he edged over to stand in front of Severus who laid very still on the bed. “Why would I care?”

“We used to collect them, remember?”

Sirius did remember. If he’d been alone, he could’ve been nicer about it but all he could think about was the way his parents would react if they found out he’d snuck a Mudblood into his room.

“Just get out,” Sirius grabbed Regulus by the arm and forced him back the way he’d come. Regulus barely had time to look hurt before the door slammed shut in his face.

An hour later, Sirius ushered Severus out of the house. Only fifteen minutes after that, his parents returned from their lunch with the Mulcibers.

Regulus ran straight to Walburga and circled her waist with his arms, looking like he was six rather than nine.

“Sirius was mean to me,” he complained and she smoothed a hand over his hair.

“Do you still expect anything different?” she asked blithely, as though Sirius was not in the foyer with them, listening to every word.

“Walburga,” Orion said in a low, warning tone and she shook off Regulus’s arms.

“I’m going to take a bath,” she announced to the room at large and drifted away, up the stairs. Regulus flounced off, looking dissatisfied that Sirius hadn’t been punished.

Sirius looked at his father and his father looked at him. The older Sirius got, the more he recognized his own face in Orion’s - the same sharply angled nose that rounded at the tip, the same dark brown perpetually sleepy eyes, the same jutting jawline.

“I’ll be glad when you’re at Hogwarts,” Orion said, not unkindly. “Some time in Slytherin will straighten you out.”

He left then, too, and Sirius was alone.

Chapter 3

September 1971 - First Year

Sirius burst through the brick barrier at Platform 9 ¾, happily several paces in front of his parents. The Hogwarts Express parked on the tracks before him, shiny and scarlet, and he took a moment to admire it before sweeping his gaze over the families milling about. He recognized some of them - the Shafiqs, fussing with Kamila's cat who refused to stay in its wicker basket; the Mulcibers, who were hugging Achilles goodbye; the Malfoys, who looked back at him with cool expressions.

Then he found Severus, standing among the crowd next to his mother, looking almost frightened. Sirius grinned at him and headed over, dragging his trunk and his caged owl, Putu, behind him.

"Mum and Dad are right behind me," Sirius said. "They're going to have a fit."

Walburga and Orion stepped through the brick. They looked as miserably haughty as ever. Orion clutched Regulus as if expecting a Mudblood would get too close and contaminate him. Regulus, for his part, stared at the train with wide, impressed eyes.

"Walburga, is that you?" Eileen Snape asked as his family approached. "It's been years."

"Since you married a Muggle," Walburga said flatly. Her dark eyes barely glanced at Eileen before turning sharply to Sirius. "Why are you talking to them? Let's go."

"We're sitting together on the train." Sirius was thrilled and terrified to finally reveal the hidden friendship. He'd pushed as many buttons as he could the past year but he knew this was the giant, red, self-destruct one. He gathered his courage and said, "You know, Severus lives in Spinner's End."

"Does he now?" Orion turned to him, looking wary and disappointed. "Is that where you've been going all this time? You're spending time with a Mudblood?"

"Really!" Eileen went pink and drew Severus closer to her. "How dare you!"

Sirius looked between the adults and didn't understand her reaction. Did she expect his parents would be pleased with the friendship?

"Come along," Walburga commanded. "Or we'll take that owl back and snap your broomstick the moment we get home." It was the most she'd said to him in weeks, maybe months. Sirius knew she would happily fulfill her threat so he protested with a grimace but followed her to the train.

"You have all your things?" Orion asked and Sirius nodded, looking at a point over his father's shoulder instead of his face. "We'll see you at Christmas, then."

That was all the farewell his family cared to give. They swept away in a smoothly moving pack. Sirius climbed aboard without bothering to watch them go. His trunk thudded against the steps and Putu trilled in protest each time.

He threw himself into the first empty compartment he found but he'd barely sat down when the compartment door opened and another boy stepped in. Sirius grinned instantly.

"Alright then?" the boy asked. He bent over his trunk and lifted his robes out. "Don't mind if I

change, do you? These things are bloody uncomfortable.” He tugged a belt loop on his jeans.

“Go ahead,” Sirius said. He kicked his feet up onto the seat opposite him and added, “I’m Sirius.”

“James,” he answered. His head disappeared as he pulled his shirt over his head. Then it popped back out, his glasses knocked askew. They hung from one temple, stuck in his tightly curled hair.

James stuffed his Muggle clothes away and sat back down. He seemed about to say something when the door opened once more. It was Severus, carrying a brown paper bag and looking a bit misty-eyed as he took a seat.

“Sorry about my parents,” Sirius said to him. “I told you they’re horrible.”

“What’d they do?” James asked. He looked between them with unconcealed curiosity.

“They hate Muggles,” Sirius said. “So did I, before I met Severus.” That wasn’t quite the truth. He’d been intrigued by Muggles his entire life. His family had repressed that interest; he was accustomed to parroting their feelings.

“You’ll be Slytherin, then,” James said unhappily.

“What about you?” Sirius asked.

“Gryffindor.”

“Oh,” Sirius looked at James and James met his gaze evenly. There was something about him that Sirius liked. Maybe it was that he smiled so easily. Sirius was used to grimaces and frowns and sneers. Friendliness was refreshing.

James must not have been too bothered by Sirius’s inevitable house because he drew out a deck of cards. “Exploding Snap?”

Sirius tried to get Severus to play but he refused, choosing instead to stare out the window morosely. He was close to his mother, Sirius knew. He must have been missing her. Sirius had no idea what that was like.

He played Snap with James and they talked, between explosions and ducking to avoid facial burns. They spoke about their families, Hogwarts, and Quidditch. Sirius had never had another person to really discuss these things with. His parents were disapproving of all his opinions, Regulus was too childish to carry on a conversation of any length, and Severus-

Severus still didn’t know most of the magical works well enough to talk about it. Also, though Sirius felt a twinge of guilt at the disloyalty, he could admit to himself that Severus’s gloominess did not lend itself to the best discussions. He took a lot of reassurance, a lot of careful topic shifting. With James, everything came naturally.

They talked the entire trip and through a boat ride across a vast lake. When they emerged from a dark staircase into a room before a giant set of doors, James nodded at the woman. “Professor McGonagall,” he murmured knowingly right before she introduced herself as such. “Went to school with my parents.”

“Your parents must be ancient,” Sirius said. James elbowed him, reproachfully but not harshly.

Professor McGonagall escorted them into the Great Hall. Sirius looked instantly to the Slytherin table. He saw his cousin, Narcissa, sitting next to her boyfriend, Lucius. Further down the table

was a cluster of boys Sirius knew from so many social functions - Silah Shafiq, Clifford Montague, Francis Paquette. Dozens of names and faces, all associated with his parents and their friends. They brought disdain and misery everywhere they went and Slytherin house was no exception.

Sirius glanced over at James, focused on the Sorting Hat, and then at Severus, peering up at the enchanted ceiling. His gaze continued until it stopped at Gryffindor table.

He'd heard about Gryffindor house his entire life. Gryffindors were foolish, reckless; they were a house of Muggle-lovers and Mudbloods. That's what he'd been told year after year. When he looked at the students accented in scarlet and gold, they simply seemed happy.

Sirius's name was called and he moved toward the stool, forcing a grin onto his face to hide the sudden turmoil inside him. Was it possible? Could he go into Gryffindor? It would be the last thing his parents would ever expect.

Less than a minute later, the Sorting Hat announced, "GRYFFINDOR," to the Great Hall and Sirius jumped down. He spotted Severus in the crowd still awaiting his sorting. He looked flabbergasted and Sirius felt a pang of guilt.

It was easily forgotten when he sat down at the Gryffindor table and received a round of back slaps in congratulations. By the time James was sorted into Gryffindor as well, Sirius was beaming, thrilled with where he'd ended up.

"Didn't think I'd see you here," James said as he dropped into the spot next to Sirius.

"Me either," Sirius admitted.

He watched Severus get sorted into Slytherin and walk over to the table. He might as well be approaching an executioner for how dejected he looked.

October 1971

"Isn't he the one you knew on the train?" James asked, nudging Sirius's foot under the table. Sirius followed his gaze to see Severus, hunched over a book and seated next to a pale and dark-haired girl.

"Mhm."

"You still talk to him?"

"Of course not." Sirius looked away and back down at the paper he was attempting to fold into a blocky troll. They sat in the History classroom, ignoring Professor Binns as he touched on the minutiae of 12th Century vampire domestication. "He's a Slytherin."

"So you don't care if we, say, put itching powder down his robes?" James asked, openly staring at the lank strands of black hair that obscured Severus's face.

"Why stop at him?" Sirius shot back. "We could get the whole house at once."

James lit up at the suggestion and began to muse where they could get so much powder. Sirius listened and fidgeted with the folded parchment in his hands. It bore no troll features whatsoever; in fact, it resembled little more than a scrunched note. He pocketed the failed origami, nestling it next to the decorative pheasant quill he'd slipped off Peter Pettigrew's desk earlier that day in Transfiguration.

He'd never minded needling Severus when it was the two of them but they were friends; James viewed him as nothing more than a particularly squirmy snake. Bothering Severus this way, as part of a house rivalry, made him feel guilty and that made him feel angry and *that* made him much more willing to go along with James's ideas.

Remus Lupin, their housemate, turned around suddenly. His gray eyes looked first at Sirius and then settled on James. "I can help you with the itching powder," he said in low, confident tones. "I can check the library for charms that would help."

"Could you?" James appraised Remus for a moment before breaking into a grin. "I'll take that."

"Of course he will," Sirius said. "James can't read."

The conversation devolved into bickering. When Binns dismissed the class, Remus fell into step beside them in the corridor, and they walked to lunch together.

May 1972

Sirius kicked the seat in front of him idly in a repetitive *thump thump* of shoe against plastic. Eventually the girl, some brunette fourth year that he vaguely recognized, hissed at him to stop.

He gave the seat a final kick as she turned back around but then stilled his legs.

"How long can this match drag on?" Sirius asked James, who sat leaning forward with his hands gripping his knees.

James didn't answer. Remus, sitting on James's other side, leaned forward so he and Sirius could see each other. "I thought you'd like this," he said, gesturing at the pitch. "Last match of the season. Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw. Isn't that the excitement you live for?"

"Hardly. I'd rather be playing."

"Next year," James said, eyes still glued on the maroon figures streaking around the pitch.

"Do you think-"

Remus's words disappeared beneath the yells and screams that erupted from the stands as the Ravenclaw seeker's hands curled around the Snitch. James mouthed a string of expletives and then slumped back in his chair, red-faced.

"Next year," James said again. "Gryffindor will win next year when we're on the team."

It was a morose scarlet crowd that climbed down the stands and drifted back toward the castle. The three boys travelled in a silent cluster, James brooding, Remus thoughtful, and Sirius bored.

"The weather's nice," Sirius said as they approached the entrance. "Why don't we stay outside?" He spun in place and cast a sweeping glance over the grounds. His eyes landed in the greenhouses. "We could check on our aconite."

"Absolutely not," Remus said sharply.

James elbowed Sirius. "Lupin doesn't have one, remember?"

"Right." Remus had missed the class, claiming to be off visiting his mother. He was a horrible liar.

Sirius and James knew he was hiding something but had decided not to pester him about it. More accurately, James badgered Sirius into agreeing to leave him alone. "Then, what?"

They wandered the grounds aimlessly. The grass under their feet was still damp from the morning dew; a thick blanket of clouds prevented the sun's rays from drying it. James offered sporadic commentary on where the match had gone wrong.

A shrill squeal followed by several harsh laughs cut through the peace of the afternoon. James took off immediately in the direction of the sound with Sirius and Remus trailing behind. On the far side of a thick copse, clustered just outside the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the boys came upon a ring of four Slytherins. Inside the circle crouched their housemate Peter Pettigrew. His hands circled the back of his head and he whimpered intermittently.

"What's going on here?" James asked loudly. The Slytherins whirled as one, wands drawn to match the one James extended before him. Sirius moved to draw his own but Montague, a fourth year, shook his head. They were all higher years, including their house's Prefect, Heath Barnum.

"Get out of here," Shafiq said in a bored tone, flicking disinterested eyes over the trio. "You can't seriously expect to take all of us."

"Considering one of us is worth about ten of you, yeah, I expect we'll be fine," James said and Sirius tugged out his wand. He shot off an Eublio Jinx, encasing Montague in a gelatinous bubble, and at the exact same moment James ducked under a yellow beam. He popped back up to Stun Shafiq.

Paquette's Leg-Locker Curse caught Sirius on the hip and he wobbled, off balance, before toppling to the ground. James took a Furnunculus curse to the face but didn't react to the boils erupting across his face. Instead he spat, "Carpe retractum!" His wand unleashed a green coil which wrapped itself around Barnum; James yanked his wand and he tripped, joining Sirius on the ground.

Paquette cast an Engorgement Charm at Remus, who had not even pulled his wand. Remus flung up his hands to stop the blue mist from enveloping his face. They began to swell at a rapid pace. James turned to Paquette, a new fury on his face.

Paquette dodged James's Stunning spell by practically pirouetting in place. Still stuck on the ground, Sirius shot off his own and that one caught Paquette mid-spin. His frozen body tumbled down. Three of the four Slytherins laid still on the ground while Montague stood inside the bubble with his wand drawn, testing out different spells to try to escape.

"Disgusting," James spat. With the threat abated, Sirius ended his Leg-Locker Curse and climbed to his feet a bit stiffly. James then turned to Remus. "You alright?" The swelling in his hands seemed to have stopped but now they were easily the size of Hagrid's and dangled heavily at his side.

"I'm okay," Remus said, "but I think I need the hospital wing."

"I think he does too," Sirius said and nodded at Peter. He'd uncovered his head but remained hunched down. His wide pale eyes roamed over the Stunned Slytherins and then turned to James.

"Thank you," he whispered. Dried blood crusted each nostril and his hair hung in sweaty sections around his red-cheeked face.

"Gryffindors have to stick together," James said firmly and offered his hand. Peter climbed to his

feet, still looking at James with obvious gratitude.

"I helped too," Sirius pointed out.

"Right, yes, th-thank you," Peter said, shrinking back once more. James kicked at Sirius's feet.

"Be nice," he admonished. "Peter's been through a shock."

"So's your face," Sirius said and poked a boil. James hissed in pain and swatted his hand away.

"Watch it, you."

Madam Pomfrey interrogated them thoroughly as she shrunk Remus's hands, dabbed Boil-Cure Potion on James's cheeks, and healed Peter's broken nose.

"I see you escaped unscathed," she said to Sirius testily.

"Not entirely," he said and lifted up the hem of his robe. "Look, grass stain."

She puffed up, clearly poised to admonish him, and the door opened. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Slughorn stepped inside, the four Slytherin trailing behind them with various expressions of discontent on their faces. James's eyes narrowed instantly and he opened his mouth.

"Please don't, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said with a small shake of his head. "We've had enough fighting for one day."

On the way out of the hospital wing, Sirius slipped a roll of bandages and a glass thermometer into his pocket.

The four boys returned to their common room and settled into armchairs, regarding each other quietly for a moment. Peter could not seem to take his admiring eyes off James for more than a few seconds.

"Why were they bothering you?" James asked.

"They know my dad's a Muggle," Peter answered.

"You're a Mudblood?" Sirius asked with interest. Three heads snapped to stare at him. Peter's jaw hung loosely and Remus's eyebrows knitted together. James wore nearly the same look as when he'd faced down the Slytherins.

"Why did you say that?" he snapped.

"Is that not what he is?" Sirius floundered at their reaction. A memory popped up of his mother at the train station using the same word to describe Severus and Eileen's resulting outrage. "Is that - should I not say that?"

"You really don't know?" The tightness in James's face relaxed, although not fully. "That's a foul word, Sirius."

"Oh." Sirius looked at Remus. "Did you know that?" Remus nodded. "My parents always used it."

"Yeah, well, your parents..." James trailed off with a vague hand gesture. Sirius knew what he meant.

Chapter 4

August 1972

The sun pummeled Jaipur relentlessly the day Narcissa married Lucius Malfoy. The usually airy halls of the villa felt oppressive in the scorching heat and Sirius spent the ceremony slicking sweat through his hair.

After the kiss, during which Sirius watched shadows on the ceiling, Narcissa slipped out of the room. The adults immediately sprung into action, levitating chairs and calling for the elves. By the time she returned, white dress robes replaced by a red lehenga choli, the room transformed into little more than a dance floor with tables of food placed along one wall.

Sirius piled a plate high with food and then fled. He took his meal to a covered balcony that overlooked the village. He ate with his plate on the railing and his eyes roaming the faraway streets. They were packed full of people and color in some sort of parade, though he couldn't make out much more detail than that.

The faint echoes of the wedding drifted past him. Sirius wished James and Remus were there to entertain him. Peter, too, he added grudgingly, though he would be just as happy to leave him out of the theoretical invitation. The boy rarely left James's side ever since they'd rescued him from the Slytherins. He was good at Potions and had a useful habit of stopping Sirius from adding ingredients in the wrong order but other than that he was a round, shiny nuisance.

Sirius stayed outside even when orange and purple fingers reached across the sky, dusky blue chasing them down to the horizon. A touch at his elbow startled him and he turned to find Regulus hovering at his side, watching him with solemn eyes.

"Mum's looking for you."

Sirius didn't answer. Regulus reached a hand up and began to fiddle with his lower lip, pinching it and prying off dry flecks of skin. Sirius made a disgusted noise and looked away.

"Do you think I'll get into Gryffindor too?" Regulus asked.

Sirius laughed. "Definitely not."

"Why not?" he demanded. His irritatingly familiar petulant tone crept in. "You did."

"You're not brave," Sirius said. "That's reason one. Reason two, you couldn't bear to disappoint our parents." He looked back over at his brother, who still fiddled with his mouth. "How can you stand it? Don't you ever want to do anything fun?"

"Like what?"

"Like sneak into the village." There was a challenge in Sirius's voice and Regulus caught it right away, eyes widening as he turned to look. The rows of people lining the streets were beginning to disperse into squat mud houses.

"It's Narcissa's wedding," Regulus said. "Mum will be furious."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed. "So are you in?"

The brothers stood in silence for a few minutes. Sirius watched Regulus's face flicker through warring emotions and for a moment thought his younger brother might agree. He had the image of the two of them slipping through the dirt streets, drawing stares with their robes, and watching the straggling end of the parade up close.

"I'm going back inside," Regulus said. The small flicker of hope in his chest extinguished.

"Right," Sirius said and didn't bother to look at Regulus as he walked away.

September 1972 - Second Year

"That's your brother?" Peter asked, peering across the hall to where Regulus sat squashed between two much larger boys. Sirius looked at him, briefly, and as his eyes slid down the table they paused on Severus talking to that girl he was always with, Mary or something like that. He'd grown paler and thinner over the summer and Sirius felt a sting of regret for not visiting him during the sporadic days they'd been home and not traveling. His dad had probably beat him all summer and Sirius had done nothing to help.

"Yeah," James answered when Sirius said nothing. "McGonagall said Black, didn't she?"

"Regular geniuses, you two. The brown boy with the same last name is my brother, yes."

"You've never mentioned him," Peter pointed out.

"He did to me," James said. "On the train when we met. A couple other times, I think."

"I try to avoid thinking about him as much as possible." Sirius speared a stalk of broccoli. "You all are making that very hard right now."

"How was your summer, James?" Peter asked. Sirius chewed, trying to decide if he appreciated the subject change or was annoyed by Peter's continued fawning. He settled on both.

"It was okay." James shrugged. "Dad got me a new broom for the tryouts this year. Comet 240."

Sirius let out a low whistle which was drowned out by Peter's joyous and unnecessary applause. "That's the latest Comet," he said admiringly once his hands stilled.

"You trying out?" James asked Sirius and then flicked his eyes towards Remus and Peter. "Any of you?"

"Yeah," Sirius said while the others shook their heads. "I'm thinking Beater, what about you?"

"Seeker," James said instantly.

"Of course," Sirius said and James matched his grin.

Later in the dorm, James poked his head into Sirius's four-poster.

"You notice Remus didn't say anything at dinner?" he asked, so low that Sirius barely caught the words.

"Yeah," Sirius said after a moment's pause to review the evening. "I guess he didn't."

"He looked like he was trying not to pass out the whole time and-" James's voice dropped another notch, forcing Sirius to mostly lip-read the next words, "-I saw a cut on his shoulder. When he reached for pudding, his robe slipped."

Sirius thought of Severus, marked up and struggling to move. Remus, though, always spoke of his parents highly. They sent him weekly letters and monthly care packages. Sirius had a very hard time believing they would be the cause of anything.

"We should watch him this year," Sirius said. "Finally figure out what's going on with him. I know you didn't want to but..."

"It's time," James finished. "Agreed. I'll let Peter know."

He ducked out and Sirius fell back against his singular pillow. He missed the squishy pile in his own bedroom and the soft, oversized blankets. The Hogwarts cotton felt scratchy against his bare arms and the sounds of the other boys kept him from fully relaxing.

After what felt like hours tossing and turning, Sirius eased his Transfiguration textbook and a pair of socks out of his trunk. On his way back into bed, he plucked his wand from the nightstand. Safely behind his four-poster curtains, Sirius flipped through his textbook to find spells to practice. All hues of light illuminated his bed as he worked through the night, Transfiguring his socks into all kinds of things and then back again.

November 1972

Sirius watched Severus as he strode into Potions and dropped stiffly into a seat next to that girl, Meredith? She looked at him sympathetically.

"Greasy git," James said. "Still can't believe him cursing us."

Sirius ignored him and bent down to his bag. He pulled out his textbook, a few sheets of parchment, and a quill then placed them on the work table. His forehead quickly followed, coming to rest on the cool glossy cover of the book.

He felt a sleepy sort of sickness weighing him down whenever he remembered the night before. He'd tried to share his Halloween candy with Severus, knowing he never got any, but the whole thing fell apart when James and Remus walked into the same empty classroom they were in.

Sirius had been so startled and embarrassed that he'd gone along with James goading him to curse Severus. He couldn't stop replaying the stunned betrayal slapped across Severus's face.

"Still can't believe I missed it," Peter said from the table behind them where he sat next to Remus.

Sirius lifted his head and swung it around. "Shut the fuck up." He didn't bother to lower his voice. Peter jerked back, eyes widening, and half the class turned to stare at him. Sirius noticed Severus was not one of them.

"Mr. Black," Slughorn said, turning from the chalkboard where he was scrawling the day's directions. "Inappropriate language for the classroom. Ten points from Gryffindor."

"Make it twenty," Sirius said, and leapt to his feet. "Actually, make it fifty. Fuck off, you fat slug, and fuck off to your stupid class." He abandoned his things and stormed out of the classroom. He

tried to focus on Slughorn's surprise or Peter's hurt but the only image that crowded his mind was Severus with a hand pressed to the mark left by his stinging hex.

He ran up staircases and made it to the third floor before he fell to the ground, knees drawn to his chest and face pressed to his knees.

"Sirius." Sirius lifted his head to look at James, a school bag slung over each shoulder. He dropped one at Sirius's feet. "You forgot this."

"Thanks," Sirius said. He scrubbed his sleeve over his eyes and hoped James couldn't tell they were nearly wet. "How bad is it?"

"He said detention every night until holidays." James dropped down next to him and crossed his legs. "Not too bad. That's only a few weeks."

"Good thing I didn't make the team," Sirius said. "I'd have to quit."

"Is that what's bothering you?" James sounded relieved to have figured it out. "You're only second year and you were so close. You'll make it next year, I'm sure of it."

"*You're* only second year and you got on it," Sirius said, embracing the lie. "But I suppose you're right."

They sat in the corridor together until classes ended and students began to squeeze past them, shooting them looks that ranged from curious to critical. Then they climbed to their feet and walked together towards Herbology.

Sirius passed Severus going the opposite direction in the corridor. He clenched his jaw and thought, *Quidditch. I'm upset about Quidditch.*

February 1973

Nighttime turned the Gryffindor common room into an obstacle course. Even with three lit wands, Sirius, James, and Peter struggled to wind their way through it. Sofas and wooden chairs scattered across the patterned carpet at seemingly random. James banged his leg into a coffee table and swore.

"I'm sure there's not this much furniture during the day," Sirius said. "Must be the elves plotting against us."

"Ha ha," James said, rubbing his shin.

They picked their way to the large window overlooking the grounds and peered out as one. Moonlight glimmered across the grounds and reflected off the lake, creating illusions within the shadows.

"You really think he's out there?" Peter asked, clutching several books to his chest.

"Yeah," James said, eyes fixed on the full moon. "I do."

They settled themselves onto the window seat and Peter opened a book on magical creatures, propping it on his crossed legs. "Werewolf features," he read aloud. "Though werewolves are fearsome beasts, they are easy to detect when they attempt to live among wizardkind. Look for a

person that regularly disappears around the full moon, often wears scratches and other injuries, and goes through marked cycles of hormonal changes.”

“Dunno about the last one,” James said, “but the rest is spot on.”

“Fearsome beasts,” Sirius quoted. “Bullshit.”

“Yeah,” Peter agreed. “Bull...shit.” He looked impressed with himself for managing the swear.

“Should we say anything?” James asked.

“Yes.” Sirius shifted to balance on his knees and pressed his hands against the glass. “Not today, though. He’ll be exhausted.”

“Fair,” James said. “Peter, keep reading.”

They passed the last few hours of the early morning reading and discussing what James dubbed Remus’s “furry little problem.” As gray light began to filter into the room, they extinguished their wands.

Eventually, as the thinnest layer of gold cracked the dark sky, Peter said, “Look!”

All three boys watched two figures shuffle across the lawn. It was hard to make out their faces at such a distance and through such dim lightning. The taller figure seemed to be supporting the smaller as they moved slowly towards the grand entrance. For a moment, their features were thrown into sharp relief in the dawn, and then they turned a corner and disappeared.

“That’s him,” James said. “And Pomfrey.”

Sirius looked at one of the books. It was opened to a diagram of a snarling werewolf, marked with vulnerable spots and the best spells to target each. He had a hard time imagining Remus like that.

Gryffindors began to trickle out of the dormitories. Some shot suspicious looks at the second years clustered by the window. After several rounds of passing yawns back and forth, they climbed the stairs to go back to bed, thankful that February’s full moon fell on a weekend.

Sirius watched Remus over the next week. On Monday, he silently picked at his breakfast with silverware that shook due to trembling hands. Being awake seemed to take his whole concentration and he ate little. On Wednesday, he ate small bits and smiled more easily, though he still looked pale and tired. By Friday, he fully perked up, eating with gusto and laughing when James did an impression of Peeves.

It was Saturday afternoon, a week after the full moon, that the four friends went to an unused room.

“What are we doing here?” Remus asked, looking over the dusty tarps covering unknown objects.

“We wanted to talk to you without being overheard,” James said and Remus’s face flickered toward nervous.

“Oh?”

“We know,” James said gently. “About you and the full moon.”

The nerves gave way to full terror and Remus stumbled backward. Then his hand twitched toward his wand. Sirius laughed. “What are you doing that for?”

"You're going to curse me," Remus said, gripping his wand now but at his side. Sirius doubted he could hex them even if he wanted to. It was funny in a twisted way that the most gentle of them was the werewolf.

"Of course we're not," James said.

"Yeah, don't be stupid," Sirius agreed. He ignored the way Peter giggled at that. "If we were going to curse you, it'd be while you were sleeping."

"Or from behind," James added.

"Or in the dormitory," Peter tried.

"That's what I said," Sirius made a face at Remus who half-smiled in response.

"You said sleeping," Peter said, a trace petulantly. "He could be awake in the room or sleeping on a sofa."

"Well, you've ruined it," Sirius said. "Anyway, Remus, put your wand away. We want to help."

"You do help," Remus said quietly. "You're the first friends I've had. Before, I had to stay home all the time in case anyone got suspicious. You all give me a reason to bother with all of this."

"Bother with?" Sirius asked. "Like you'd go back to your parents otherwise?"

"No," Remus put his wand away and didn't look at them. "Not like I'd go back."

Sirius glanced at James and found him staring at Remus with an evidently troubled look.

"Do you mean-" Peter started to say.

"Well," James interrupted, "time for lunch, isn't it? I'm starving."

That night James crawled onto Sirius's bed and sat at the foot of it, knees pulled to his chest. "Do you think Remus really would?"

Sirius thought about everything they'd read when he said, "Being a werewolf does sound pretty miserable."

"But miserable enough to - to die?" James stumbled over the more accurate term and Sirius didn't correct him.

"I guess so."

"No," James said with a shake of his head. "We're going to help him. Figure out some way to make it more bearable."

James smiled like he thought they were doing something nice, being good people. Sirius realized he'd never felt that way before. He wasn't sure being good was something he actually cared about.

July 1973

Sirius slipped past the trio of older teenagers crowd the sidewalk and brushed into the side of the shortest one.

"Watch it," he snapped, turning to scowl at Sirius.

Sirius backed away and channeled Peter in his attempt to look pathetic.

"Don't make the kid cry," one of the others said and all three laughed. Sirius slunk away as they continued teasing each other. It was only after he turned a corner that he let himself grin and pull out the wallet he'd slipped out of the git's back pocket.

He'd spent his few weeks in India learning how to pickpocket, practicing on the streets of Jaipur, Bombay, and Varanasi. Lifting things off desks and out of drawers seemed tame in comparison now.

Sirius pulled a few green bills out before dropping the wallet in a bin outside an ice cream shop. Then he stepped inside and ordered two cones. He held them both as he stood outside Garrison Grocer & More and waited.

After a few minutes, Severus shuffled out, looking as disgruntled as he had a few hours earlier when Sirius went through his queue and convinced him to talk. Sirius pinned on his brightest smile, feeling that familiar swoop of guilt in his gut, and held out one of the cones.

"Pistachio," he offered. "Your favorite."

"I thought you didn't have money." Severus eyed the cone but didn't take it.

"I didn't." Sirius licked the drips from the chocolate ice cream off his hand and then crunched into the cone. "I've been practicing pickpocketing."

"Hooligan," Severus said and some of the hardness went out of him as they stood together on the pavement.

"You don't want the ice cream?" Sirius asked, disappointed.

"No." Sirius sighed and tossed the cone in after the wallet. Severus looked in no mood to talk. Sirius couldn't think of where to begin to fix things so he simply turned and gestured for Severus to follow him.

"What do you want?" Severus asked after they'd walked a while in silence. He slowed and then stopped, watching Sirius with suspicious eyes.

"I got sent home early," Sirius said. "Narcissa and Bellatrix went to Bombay to shop for formal robes. While they were out I found a Muggle village nearby. Snogged a girl I met there and someone who knows my uncle told him - they're much less prejudiced against Muggles there; it's class they care about, not blood - and he told my mum and, long story short, here I am." He inhaled as he finished his story, feeling more foolish with each word. When he talked, he had a harder time feeling bad that he'd cursed Severus.

"You cursed me," Severus said, as if he'd read Sirius's mind.

"It was only a stinging hex," he tried but even to himself the words sounded weak.

"That time. Before that there was itching powder and color-changing my hair green and after, there were all kinds of curses. You've been-" Severus cut himself off. Sirius knew where he was going.

"A shit-for-brains tosser?" he supplied helpfully. "I know it, Sev. It's not - do you want me to tell James we're friends? I will."

"Of course not." Well, ouch. "I'll take you not hexing me at every turn. Or any turn, for that matter."

"Done," Sirius said immediately. "We have bigger plans for this year. I can convince James to lay off you, no problem." It was true. Their plan to help Remus was so all-consuming they'd barely have time to eat and sleep let alone bother the Slytherins.

"Alright."

"Alright?" Sirius repeated, feeling that it very much wasn't.

"What do you want me to say?"

"You can punch me," Sirius offered. "Hex me. Pants me."

"Why would I ever do that?" Severus asked with clear disgust.

"It'd be humiliating," Sirius said and felt a little thrill of victory when Severus's mouth twitched into a small smile.

"You do deserve a little humiliation," Severus said and resumed walking. Sirius didn't bother holding back his grin as he fell into step beside the other boy.

"Absolutely I do," Sirius agreed. "So, pantsing it is?"

Severus responded by shoving him and he stumbled a little into the road, laughing. From there the conversation fell into a more natural pace. Severus was still wound up, he could tell. For his part, Sirius felt light and happy, relieved to have the burden of guilt lifted off him.

They eventually made their way to Severus's house. It looked as dilapidated as ever. The paint was nearly fully weathered away from the front door and one detached gutter slanted into the ground. Tobias's junker of a car sat in the driveway, parked almost horizontally. Sirius's heart began to thud, loud and heavy in his chest, as it always did when he thought of Severus's father.

"Is he home?" Sirius asked, barely managing to sound flat rather than enraged.

"At the pub right now," Severus said.

"Is he still beating on you?"

"Nah."

"Good," Sirius said. The tightness in his chest released, although not fully. "I'll see you around, then?"

Severus stared at him. For a moment, Sirius was afraid he'd say no. But he nodded, a single tight incline of his head, and then stepped through the front door.

Chapter 5

November 1973 - Third Year

Sirius stumbled out of the locker room with his robes clinging to his still-damp skin. His thighs burned and an aching strain worked through his shoulders. James caught up to him and jabbed an elbow into his upper arm, which had caught a Bludger during the match. Sirius grit his teeth against a hiss of pain.

"Brilliant game. Glad you tried out again, eh?" James asked, grinning.

"No," Sirius answered. "Think I'll quit."

He moped the walk up to Gryffindor tower and then collapsed into an armchair in the common room, throwing his feet onto Remus's lap.

"Thanks," Remus said as he inspected the mud and grass blades now smeared against his robes. "Now get off. I have to go to the library for some Charms extra credit."

"Perfect," James murmured as he watched Remus slip out the portrait hole. "Peter, go get the stuff."

Five minutes later, Peter hustled down the dormitory stairs with an armful of materials. They resettled into a more private corner of the common room, a library book and several scrolls of notes spread out before them.

"We left off on the meditation portion," Peter said as he flipped through pages.

"An hour underwater with our eyes covered," Sirius said. "Thinking animal thoughts."

"We'll be thinking drowning thoughts if we can't figure out a way to breathe," James said. "I don't know any spells for that."

"We should ask Professor Flitwick next class," Peter said and the other two nodded.

"What's it say comes after meditation?" James asked, bending his head closer to the book.

"Fasting," Peter answered. "A week without food."

"Thinking animal thoughts," Sirius repeated.

"Thinking starving thoughts," James said sadly and placed a sympathetic hand on his own belly.

January 1974

Sirius concentrated very hard on Severus, mentally willing him to look over so he could signal for them to meet up after breakfast. Severus didn't pick up the telepathic message; he kept his attention fixed on the dark-haired girl he always hung around with. Sirius felt a prickle of irritation.

"What are you staring at?" James asked around a strip of eggy bread.

"Who's that?" Sirius nodded at the girl and his three friends turned to unsubtly follow his gaze.

Sirius almost hoped the movement would draw Severus's attention but even that didn't work.

"Marceline Blanchet?" Remus sent him a very concerned look. "You've had classes with her for almost three years and you don't know who she is?"

"She's a Slytherin," he said with a shrug even as he finally committed her name to memory.

"Why the interest?" Peter asked from his seat across the table. "Aren't you going with Florence?"

"Oh, yeah," Sirius said and glanced over to where she sat at the Hufflepuff table. She was fit and she was always willing to sneak into a greenhouse together. He kept forgetting about her, though, and when they snogged he found it a bit boring. "Yeah, I am. Wasn't saying I fancy Blanchet either."

"I'm still stuck on you not knowing her name." Remus skimmed a look over the Great Hall and pointed at a Ravenclaw with frizzy red hair. "What's his name?"

"Patrick?" Sirius guessed.

James patted Remus's shoulder when he sighed. "He has more important things on his mind," James said. "Like Quidditch."

"If I never hear the Q-word again, it'll be too soon," Remus said and stood from the table.

Finally, Severus looked over. Sirius widened his eyes and blinked rapidly, hoping his friend would catch the signal.

"I take it back," James said to Peter. "Something's definitely wrong with him. Think it's the Bludger he took to the head last month?"

After they walked out of the Great Hall, Sirius made an excuse to break off from the group, which did nothing to calm their concerns. He doubled back and found Severus hovering outside grand double doors. Without a word between them, they made their way to a tapestry on the fifth floor and the room obscured behind it.

"How was your holiday?" Sirius asked brightly as they sat facing each other on the dusty floor.

"I stayed here, so."

"We stayed home," Sirius said. "Narcissa and Bellatrix and their husbands practically moved in. My parents threw a dinner party nearly every night. My dad kept telling me I need to be making the right connections. Mum's long given up."

"My mum wrote me." Severus looked down at his knees. "Said my dad fell walking home from the pub and banged himself up. She's having to take care of him."

"Wish she would let him die," Sirius said and was rewarded with a look of sharp approval.

"Me too. But she can't even leave him, she definitely won't kill him." Severus hesitated before asking, "What kind of connections does he want you to make?"

"The Muggleborn-hating kind," Sirius said. He didn't miss the way Severus's face shifted. "Enough depressing stuff. I have your Christmas present."

Sirius started giving Severus presents their first year at Hogwarts when he noticed the other boy had no winter robes. Then he'd continued the tradition in second year with a set of self-inking

quills and impervious parchment.

He reached into his robes and pulled out the small wrapped box which Severus took and regarded suspiciously.

"Christmas is over," he said.

"I had to go home for this one. Open it, you'll see why."

Severus tore the shiny paper and lifted the small lid. His pale hand dipped into the box and lifted out the contents. In his palm lay a black plastic ball with a small clear window.

"What is this?" Severus asked.

"Magic 8 ball. Nicked it from a Muggle store. Then I enchanted it. Ask a question and shake it, go on."

Severus looked from the ball to Sirius a few times. He exhaled lightly and asked, "Will Sirius fall in the lake this year?"

"Hey!"

Severus smirked, shook the ball, and peered down. A small holographic image projected from the window: Professor Dumbledore's head, complete with beard and hat.

"Not likely," Dumbledore said in a voice that sounded like Sirius trying to lower his own. The head disappeared with a soft *pop*.

"Try it again," Sirius suggested.

"Will Slytherin win the house cup?"

This time it was Professor Flitwick who said in a squeaky Sirius voice, "You wish!"

"Let me try," Sirius said and Severus placed the magic 8 ball into his outstretched hands. "Will Severus get snogged this year?"

He meant it to be funny; it would have been with James. Rather than laughing, Severus looked startled; his cheeks flooded with color and his gaze snapped to the floor. He didn't look up when Professor McGonagall's disembodied head said, in Sirius's pitched voice, "Certainly not."

"The answer is always no," Sirius explained in an effort to ease the sudden tension. "Just a laugh. You don't like it?"

"I do, thank you." Severus plucked the ball from Sirius's hands without making eye contact and placed it back into the box. "I should get going. I have to finish up some Herbology homework."

Sirius, nonplussed, watched Severus leave.

May 1974

"I could've killed you all," Remus hissed, fury and fear battling for dominance in his voice. James reached out a steadying hand and he flinched away from it, scooting tighter against the hospital headboard. They'd come to visit him the morning after the full moon and finally let him in on their year's effort. "You should've told me."

"We knew it was safe," James said.

"And we knew you'd say no," Sirius added, which only turned Remus's furious gaze to him.

"So you just - just did it anyway. Got your cheap thrills at my expense?"

"At your expense?" Sirius repeated. "Are you joking? Look at yourself - no, idiot, under your clothes."

"Under-?" Remus pulled the collar of his pyjamas away and peered down at his chest. Then his head snapped up to stare at the three boys surrounding him with wide eyes. "I'm not scratched."

"You were docile as a puppy," James said.

"We read every book on werewolves in the library," Peter said. "You'd only attack humans."

"It was still stupid," Remus said as he pulled up his sleeves and inspected his forearms, scarred but free of any fresh injuries. Then he threw back his blankets and tugged up the cuffs of his bottoms to find his legs in the same condition. He lifted his gaze and looked at them one by one. His hands trembled slightly as he folded his arms across his chest.

"What animals are you, then?"

"Stag and dog," Peter said, pointing at James and Sirius respectively, "and I'm a rat." He made a face.

"Useful for getting past the Willow," James said bracingly, not for the first time.

Remus's voice was soft when he asked, "Promise you'll do it again next month?"

Chapter 6

July 1974

Sirius knelt on the floor and reached under his bed. He dragged out a wicker basket, flipped the top back, and from inside pulled out a nondescript cardboard box. His fingers slid gently over the trinkets inside: a golden bangle from his mother's vanity, a chiseled stone flute from a Muggle's waistband, and a graffitied photo of Lucius Malfoy ripped out of Narcissa's diary. He added the speckled lapwing egg he'd just lifted out of a nest in one of the villa's courtyards.

Sirius put the box and basket back where they'd been and then shuffled off to the dining room Kreacher had told him to go half an hour earlier. He expected his parents and brother, maybe one of his cousins or uncles. Instead he found his family seated across from four strangers. There was a broad-shouldered man, a woman with a sharp jawline, and what seemed to be their two teenage daughters. Sirius paused just inside the room and debated turning around.

"Sit," Orion said in a flat voice that told Sirius he would be in a lot of pain if he refused. He indicated an empty chair next to Regulus and Sirius went to it.

"Sirius," Walburga said with more warmth than he'd heard in nearly a decade, "this is the Chowdhury family. They have an estate in Meerut." He looked at her and hoped his blank expression conveyed his feelings. "They are of excellent blood and moral character."

"Okay," he said, after a lengthy pause.

"Jagdish, if you'd be so kind."

The man wiped a cloth napkin over his mouth and then said, "Certainly. Young Master Black, we've come today to formalize the betrothal to unite our families, between you and my daughter." He swept an arm over towards the closest girl. Sirius stared at her and she stared at her plate, hands in her lap and food untouched.

"I'm not marrying her," he said and at that her eyes darted to his. Straight on, she looked younger than him, maybe twelve. She also looked relieved by his protest.

"Once she's seventeen, yes, you will. It's not up to you," Orion said.

"You see what we were talking about," Walburga said to Jagdish. "This is why we know your family is the right match for Sirius. None of the families in England have the patience for him."

"Fuck off," Sirius said. Usually swearing was enough to get him exiled from whatever social gathering but this time Walburga only smiled at him with honeyed indulgence.

Jagdish leaned forward and lowered his voice when he said, "We tame and breed thestrals."

Sirius understood the implication immediately. He felt his cheeks heat as anger and embarrassment unfurled within him. He stood and fled the room, though he barely made it ten steps down the hall before his arm was grabbed.

"What did you expect?" Orion asked. He looked down at Sirius, though not as far down as he would have a year ago. "No matter how you try to shirk them, you have responsibilities."

"I never asked for that," Sirius said and managed to rip his arm free. "You can't make me marry her."

"No," Orion agreed, "but there will be consequences if you don't."

"You think I care?" Sirius asked. "Blast my name off the tapestry. Good fucking riddance."

"You will not be returning to Hogwarts."

Sirius felt all his fury boil off at once, replaced by a cold emptiness. "What?"

"If you make any more trouble - with the Chowdhurys, with Regulus, with anyone - we will be homeschooling you next year. We have a private tutor ready to begin in September."

Sirius looked away. Torturous images flashed through his mind: Regulus climbing on the train and Sirius stuck sandwiched between their parents; Remus transforming in a full moon with just a stag and a rat for company; Severus never glancing across the Great Hall to find him at the Gryffindor table; his bed and his dresser empty as the other fourth years got ready for the day.

"Will you be quiet, if you can't be agreeable?" Orion pressed.

"Yes, sir." The words passed through his lips bitterly but his father didn't complain. They returned to the dining room and Sirius sat back down. He ignored Regulus's sharply curious gaze and stared silently at his cold laal maas.

September 1974 - Fourth Year

Sirius took off from his parents the moment he passed through the brick barrier. He leapt up the train stairs and darted through the train, checking each compartment for a familiar set of curls. He found James in the middle of the train, alone and halfway through changing into his robes. Sirius shoved the door open and threw his arms around James's bare shoulders. James froze and then after a moment patted his shoulder as he disentangled himself.

"Everything alright?" he asked as he stuffed his arms into his sleeves.

"No," Sirius said and flopped into a seat. "My parents threatened to homeschool me."

"Why?" James asked, brow furrowed.

"They're fed up with me, I suppose." Sirius didn't bother explaining the demented betrothal. There was no way he would go through with it. "I had to suck up to them all summer. It was horrible."

James made a sympathetic face as the door slid open. Peter popped in, Remus behind him, and beamed at James.

"Happy start of term," Peter said.

"Happy full moons with you lot," Remus said. "The summer was brutal. My dad thinks I'm going through-" he made a face, "-werewolf puberty."

"Hope Moony doesn't try to mate with Padfoot," James said. Sirius shoved him so hard he toppled onto the floor, banging an elbow and his head on the way down. "Ouch."

As Peter helped him back up, James grinned at Remus's flush and Sirius's scowl. "Both so

touchy," he said. "Something you're not telling us?"

Even though they picked at each other and bickered through the rest of the train ride, Sirius felt happier than he had since June.

February 1975

The plastic bench of the booth squeaked a protest as Sirius scooted along it. Across the table, a girl slid in smoothly before settling down onto her bench. She drummed her nails on the shiny table and looked around the crowded room with obvious boredom.

Sirius didn't really care if she was bored or not. He didn't even know her name. She'd been standing outside the Three Broomsticks with a circle of friends when he'd passed by and noticed Severus through the window. He'd invited her in as a cover, nothing more.

"What's your name?" he asked distractedly, eyes fixed on Severus. He was next to Marceline, as always. Severus insisted so many times that they weren't a thing but there they were, squished together among a crowd of Slytherins.

"Mai," she answered. "I'm in your house. Only a year above you."

"Right," he said without looking at her.

Her hands stilled, finally, and Severus and Marceline stood up. Sirius felt a flicker of irritation watching them walk out together, Slytherin scarves wound around their necks.

"So..." Mai tried.

"Huh? Oh, you know what? I'm tired." Sirius shot out of the booth and across the room before she could answer. Then he hurried to catch up to Severus and Marceline, meandering down the streets toward Zonko's.

They visited the gift shop and Honeydukes and strolled through the streets, talking the entire time. Sirius had nearly decided to stroll up to them and make it very obvious that Severus was his friend when Remus and Peter turned a corner and, spotting him, waved him over. He went, reluctantly.

"No James?" he asked.

"He's following around Lily Evans," Remus said with a shake of his head. "Obsessed with her."

"She's very pretty," Peter said.

"He could be following her for other reasons," Sirius said. "Following someone doesn't mean you fancy them."

Remus and Peter exchanged a confused look. Sirius scrambled for an alternative. Why was he following Severus? He'd had that funny feeling, seeing him and Marceline, and forgotten to consider much else.

"He's either fancying her or stalking her," Remus said. "I hope it's the first."

"Maybe he wants to tell her she has something in her teeth." Sirius was sure he'd seen an unidentified dark sliver in Severus's. That had to be why. He was going to help his friend avoid embarrassment, nothing else, of course. The Blanchet irritation was just...something else.

“I worry about you,” Remus said, but fondly.

“Come on,” Peter said. “Let’s go drag James away from Lily. I’m hungry.”

Chapter 7

August 1975

"Will you come inside?" Severus asked. His red-rimmed eyes couldn't stay still; they darted over and around Sirius as he fidgeted with his hands. "I don't want to be alone."

They stood in front of the Snape house, two weeks after Eileen passed away. Severus, not having an owl, had thrown rocks at his window. He'd stood in the grass hugging himself and not speaking. Sirius had raced out of the house, ignoring when Orion stepped out of the study and demanded to know where he was going.

Then they'd gone to the small Muggle cemetery and seen Eileen's grave. It was worse than the pyres. Only a flimsy square of plastic marked a life lived and lost. It was worse, too, to see Severus falling apart than it had ever been to see an aunt crying into a handkerchief.

"Tobias?" Sirius asked, glancing at the front door behind Severus.

"Hasn't been home since...he's not home. Said he wasn't ever coming back but I'm not holding my breath."

They moved up the stairs to Severus's bedroom. "First time not climbing through the window," Sirius said, trying to draw a smile. Severus only looked at him blankly as they settled on the bed facing each other.

They'd sat this way many times as children but it felt different now. They took up more space and Sirius felt something buzzing inside him when their knees brushed.

"You know the last thing I said to her?" Severus asked. His voice was flat and he focused on something over Sirius's shoulder.

"What?"

"That I'm queer."

Sirius tried for a moment to think of what Severus could mean. He might have heard the word a few times out in the town but not enough to know what it meant. "You're what?"

"I like boys," Severus said. "Do...do magical people not do that?"

"Oh!" Sirius wasn't sure if his heart dropped to his stomach or leapt into his throat. He felt suddenly very warm and thought that if he stood, he might get dizzy. "Sure, of course they do. Right, Muggles don't like that, do they? Wizards don't care." He took a breath and tried to still his racing mind. Severus's mother was dead, it had nothing to do with - whatever was happening to

him. "What did Eileen say?"

"She was upset. She didn't speak to me for a week. And then..."

"She loved you," Sirius said, without a trace of doubt. "She would have come around. She had Muggle parents, right? But she would've gotten over it."

"Maybe," Severus said. His voice retained the unemotional dullness but he was looking at Sirius now with a fixed stare. Sirius rarely felt awful about himself but he did in that moment. There had to be something wrong with him that his friend was distraught and he was thinking how nicely his lashes framed his eyes, how soft his lips looked, and how easy it would be to find out how they felt against his.

"Would you kiss me?" Severus blurted out, his voice low and scratchy. A harsh red splotted his cheeks and his hands began to rub over his knees nervously.

Sirius thought he must be dreaming or hallucinating, to have Severus ask exactly what he wanted to do. Still, he wasn't going to waste the chance. He darted forward and leaned over Severus to bring their mouths together.

Instantly he knew he'd been wrong all those times he'd considered snogging boring. Kissing Severus awed him like standing in the villa and watching fireworks explode above Jaipur. More than that, even. He felt heat blossoming in his gut and spreading its way down; when he felt his own erection against his thigh, he pulled away to try and calm himself down. Severus was grieving; he didn't need Sirius trying to get off on his leg.

"Still, er, queer?" Sirius asked, fumbling with what to say.

"Yes. What about...?" Severus gestured at Sirius.

"Me?" Sirius hesitated. Severus was looking at him so blankly and he'd never shown anything close to interest before. Sirius decided he wouldn't be the one to make more out of the kiss than it was. "I'll snog anybody."

There was a beat of silence and then Severus got off the bed. "You should go." He looked tired and withdrawn. Sirius wondered if he shouldn't have kissed him. He couldn't bring himself to regret it.

"Yeah," Sirius said, going for light and friendly. "I'm going to owl you since Tobias isn't here. Owl me back or Putu will peck your finger off."

Even with his doubts, Sirius drifted back to his house feeling light, remembering Severus's mouth on his and the way he'd run his fingers through Sirius's hair. It was only when he opened the door and found his parents standing at the foot of the stairs that the warmth in him chilled.

"Did we not make our expectations for you clear?" Orion asked as the door shut behind Sirius. He heard the latch click into the faceplate and thought it sounded as ominous as cell bars slamming closed.

"You did," Sirius said. "I'm not allowed to take a walk?"

"Don't play dumb with me," Walburga hissed and strode several steps closer. Her hand lashed out and yanked Sirius's head down by his hair, a painful distortion of what Severus had done. "We know you were with that Mudblood!"

"Don't call him that," Sirius snarled and shoved at her thin shoulders. He was taller than her now,

very nearly as tall as his father, and stronger. She stumbled under the force and failed to catch herself, pulling him down with her. They fell to the floor in a heap. In the momentary struggle he managed to close his fingers around his wand, tucked into a pocket.

Orion was on him then, ripping him out of his mother's grasp and slamming him into the wall. "You dare-" he began and Sirius jammed the tip of his wand into his father's ribs. For a fraction of a second the only sound was their harsh breathing.

"Lapis corpus." His father's eyes had time to widen before the spreading gray claimed them. By the time Sirius turned his wand on his mother, his father was completely petrified in stone. Sirius knew her wand must be elsewhere or she would have blasted him across the room already.

"You cursed your father," Walburga said, faintly. Then all the volume she didn't use in the first sentence exploded out of her. "You FOUL BLOOD TRAITOR! Rid this HOUSE OF YOUR TAINTED PRESENCE! You disgust me! YOU-!"

Sirius didn't hear the rest for he'd crossed the foyer, wrenched the door open, and stepped back out into the summer evening.

He moved quickly, needing to put space between himself and his mother in case she decided to fetch her wand and come after him. He contemplated, briefly, going to Severus but after the kiss and the deadened way he'd looked, Sirius felt it wouldn't be the best place to go.

Instead he flung out his wand and called the Knight Bus. The driver recognized him and amiably agreed to charge his family for the fare. An hour later, Sirius stepped off the bus and onto the drive of a house he knew only by post.

It was dark by the time Sirius knocked. Euphemia Potter opened the door warily. "Yes?" she asked and then looked over his robes. Her face relaxed slightly. "Are you a friend of James?"

"I am," Sirius said. "Can I come in?"

September 1975 - Fifth Year

The start-of-year feast proceeded like all the others. A group of tiny children clustered nervously before the Sorting Hat and every house cheered on their new students with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The food was plentiful and delicious. It was all routine.

Except one thing. Sirius couldn't stop staring at Severus Snape.

He tried to be subtle and time the glances in between sips of water to hide behind his goblet. But even when he wasn't looking, he wanted to. He could barely pay attention as James filled Remus and Peter in on the map of Hogwarts they'd begun constructing over the summer.

"Only needs a few more finishing touches," James said as Sirius eyed the Slytherin table over a forkful of cabbage. "I think we'll be done by the end of the month. It'll be really useful *at night*."

Across the hall, Severus took a bite of something and smirked at something Marceline said in his ear. He'd forgotten about her.

He doesn't like you, Sirius thought smugly. He likes boys. He likes me.

The second the pudding plates cleared, Sirius was on his feet and heading across the Great Hall, heedless of the strange look Remus shot him.

"Snape," he said and hoped Severus would figure it out from that.

"Shoo, Black," Marceline said as she wrinkled her nose. "Stupid is catching."

Another day, he might've bothered to nettle her back, but he was single-mindedly focused and only looked at Severus one more time before departing into the corridors. He waited on the second floor just beside the staircase and when he saw Severus climbing up to him, he took off for the closest classroom.

"What is it?" Severus asked once the door closed behind them. Possible answers flew through Sirius's mind but he settled for pressing their bodies and lips together.

For a moment, Severus was unyielding. Sirius started to pull back, loosening his grip on Severus's robes, but as he moved Severus surged forward and closed the beginning of space between them.

Sirius was soon hard just as before but this time instead of pulling away he slid himself onto Severus's thigh, rocking into the soft flesh there.

"Sirius," Severus gasped, his hands scrabbling at Sirius's back. "Are you-?"

"Is that okay?" Sirius asked into his neck. Severus answered with a whimper that drove Sirius wild. He snaked a hand down and into Severus's robes. Soon he was whimpering again, and moaning and pressing desperate kisses to Sirius's neck. Sirius loved it all, the sounds and the sensations and watching Severus come apart.

They didn't talk when they finished. They watched each other for a moment, flushed and slightly awkward, before Sirius stole one more kiss, delighting in being able to do it after weeks of want. Then they slipped out of the classroom, Severus trailing slightly behind, and split apart at the now-empty staircase.

When Sirius made it to his dorm, his friends pounced.

"Where were you?" James demanded from where he sat cross-legged on Peter's bed.

"You look like you've been snogging," Peter said, crouched at his nightstand and stuffing socks and pants into the drawers.

"Have you?" James asked with interest.

"With who?" Remus asked. He sounded like he was asking out of politeness rather than any real desire to know. Sirius seized on that and turned to him.

"When's the first full moon?" he asked. He didn't miss James and Peter smirking at each other while Remus answered. Truthfully, he would be smirking too, if his friends weren't there to see.

December 1975

A light snow blanketed Hogsmeade a few days before Christmas. Sirius and Severus sat on the railing around the Shrieking Shack, shoulders pressed together partially for warmth but mostly because they took any excuse to touch each other.

"I wish it was always like this," Severus said suddenly, after Sirius finished telling a story about Regulus peeing his pants twice in the same day.

"Snowy?" Sirius guessed.

"The two of us. None of your friends or the Slytherins."

"I like my friends," Sirius said. Severus instantly began to sulk. "Oh, come on. You know I like you, too."

"Do you?" Severus asked. Sirius found that question ridiculous considering they'd snogged their way around all eight floors of Hogwarts. Before he could answer, Severus pushed off the fence and landed in the snow, creating two smudged boot prints. "Let's walk around the shops."

They browsed in separate aisles, mindful of the other students that had also stayed in the castle for the holidays. In a gift shop, Sirius tucked a glass snow globe into a pocket. When he shook it, shimmers swirled around a miniature replica of Hogsmeade. In Honeydukes, he slipped several packages of brightly wrapped chocolates up his sleeve. Back out on the snowy streets, he passed them over to Severus.

"Happy early Christmas," he said.

"You and chocolate." Severus tsked and peeled off a purple wrapper. He nibbled tentatively and then popped the whole truffle into his mouth. "White chocolate. Not bad."

"White chocolate is not real chocolate," Sirius said. "Try another."

They ate half the sweets between them; Severus stored the rest in his robes. Sirius ran a finger over the smooth glass in his pocket and contemplated showing it off but ultimately kept it hidden.

Later, back in the lonely warmth of his dorm, Sirius pulled a box out from under his bed. He'd started a new collection since the old one was forever lost to the wicker basket. This new one contained a letter from Remus, a bag of gobstones, and a pair of gardening gloves. Sirius felt a twinge of guilt looking at the gloves. He'd stolen them out of Fleamont's shed, even after everything the Potters did for him. He quickly placed the snow globe on top of the gloves and put the box back before he could dwell on it too much.

Sirius laid in bed and drowned the guilt with pleasant thoughts of Severus.

May 1976

Sirius knuckled his temples as he walked alongside James, Remus, and Peter. He'd known nearly everything on the OWL but dredging it all up and arranging it into many essays gave him an aggravating headache.

"What did you think about question eleven?" Peter asked anxiously. "I thought Professor Binns said-"

James interrupted with a noise of disgust. Peter fell silent and Sirius lowered his hands to see what he was on about.

"I'm so sick of Evans hanging around that greasy bat." Sirius felt a swoop of dread when he realized James was staring at Severus, an unnervingly angry glint in his eyes.

"Leave it," Sirius said. "I have a massive headache and we still have to revise for Transfiguration."

James didn't seem to hear him. He charged forward, calling, "Oi, Snape!"

Sirius realized too late that he was drawing his wand. "No," he groaned and hurried after his friend.

"Impedimenta!" Sirius came to a very still stop at James's side as the jinx sent Severus toppling over into the ground. He felt nauseous and warm and utterly confused. It was all happening very quickly and he couldn't quite process his best friend attacking his...whatever Severus was. Someone very important.

"Accio Snape's wand," James continued and snatched Severus's sailing wand with a grimly satisfied smile. Sirius could barely return the gaze when Severus looked at him from where he was forced down onto the grass. His eyes were dark and drawn, completely expressionless. He was always so hard to read. Did he want to be rescued? Would that only make him angrier? Besides that, what would Sirius's excuse be for stepping in? What would James think? He wrestled with these questions and did nothing.

"How was your exam?" James asked. Severus's gaze snapped back to him and the flatness was replaced with rage.

"Give me back my wand and bugger off," Severus snarled. He sounded impressively terrifying for someone immobile and wandless.

"I don't think I will," James said and pointed his wand once more.

"Sirius." His own name said so plaintively hit him like a slap across the face. He was certain then that Severus wanted him to intervene. He cast about for how he could get James to lay off without giving them away in front of the crowd of students that gathered around them.

"Great idea. Sirius, the floor is yours," James said. For the briefest of moments, Sirius hated him for the impossible and unnecessary situation he'd created.

He saw, then, a familiar severely arranged face beneath a pointed hat as Professor McGonagall burst out of the hall. Relief flooded him as he watched her faraway figure speed ever closer. He could slow this down, draw it out. Before James did anything too terrible, McGonagall would be there to wring their necks. But Severus would be unharmed and their privacy would be undisturbed.

Satisfied with this plan, Sirius lifted his wand and said, "Scourgify."

He meant to hit Severus's hair - James said *greasy*, after all - but his hand shook so badly that the spell hit Severus square in the mouth. Pink bubbles frothed and laughter rang out across the grounds. Sirius flushed as he dropped his wand, guilt and regret coursing through him.

"Have you gone mad?" Lily Evans darted forward, wand aloft and a look of fury etched into her features.

"Evans," James said pleasantly. "How are you?"

"Disgusted," she snapped and flicked her wand at Severus. He wiped his mouth, climbed to his feet, and adopted the position of a feral animal, hunched and trapped and poised to strike. It reminded Sirius of when Eileen died but worse because there was an audience and Severus had shame etched into his grief.

And he'd done that to him. He should've stood up to James. He shouldn't have cast so much as a tickling charm at Severus, not in front of all these people who didn't give a damn about him. Sirius

felt guilt before but now it seeped through him, poisoning him to his core. He shifted forward as Severus spoke.

"I don't need help from a *Mudblood*," he spat. Sirius froze. Lily's fury dropped away instantly, revealing a bitter detachment.

"Be that way, then," she said coldly.

"How dare you!" James spat - idiotically, Sirius thought.

Lily marched away and Sirius's ill-chosen savior pushed through the crowd to take her place. "You," Professor McGonagall said, lips thinned with repressed rage, "and you and you and you. Mr. Snape as well. We're going to the headmaster."

Sirius did not listen to her ravings of disappointment as she escorted them through the halls. He blanked out when Professor Dumbledore lectured them about maturity. He barely noticed when Severus spoke up and took the blame for the entire incident.

He came back to his body in the corridor, facing a furious Severus.

"Why did you cover for us?" James asked.

Severus looked at Sirius. Sirius felt his stomach bottom out. He almost stepped forward and begged for forgiveness right there in front of his friends. In the moment he considered this, Severus spoke.

"Whatever punishment they would have given you wouldn't be enough. I'll get my own justice."

"Listen-" Sirius began. Severus did not. He stalked away and disappeared around a corner. Sirius would have chased after him, if he thought it would make any difference.

"Creep," Peter muttered.

"I can't believe he called Evans that," James fumed. "Creep is right. He's a pathetic, racist, no-talent-"

Sirius spun and punched James in the mouth. When he swung again, James lunged forward and tackled him. They struggled on the floor, a mess of robes and spitting profanities, until Remus and Peter managed to pry Sirius away.

"I'll Stun you," Remus said in his ear, "but I don't want to."

"I dare you to try." Sirius jerked himself free and strode away, wiping his cut lip on his sleeve. He left James bleeding on the floor, Peter bending down to help, and Remus staring after him, bewildered.

June 1976

Sirius was a bundle of nerves the morning he boarded the Hogwarts Express. He'd spent the last month trying to corner Severus and he'd been evaded each time. He knew the train would finally give them the chance the talk and he was thrilled and terrified all at once.

He dropped his luggage off, changed out of his robes, and then walked through the narrow corridor, peeking into each compartment window. He saw Lily Evans with a group of Gryffindors,

Marceline Blanchet with a group of Slytherins, and felt a surge of irritation at both of them. He wanted to yell at them for abandoning Severus, since he couldn't yell at himself.

His heart burst into a frenzied beat when he finally found Severus, alone in a compartment and staring morosely out the window. When Sirius slid open the door, he received a brief but sharp look of hatred. Then Severus went back to looking outside.

"My parents kicked me out last summer," Sirius blurted, which was not at all what he'd practiced saying. "I'm going to stay with the Potters this summer. So we won't see each other around town."

Stupid, stupid, *stupid* bringing up James off the bat. His shame started twisting into anger - at himself, his friends, and then it turned to Severus, sitting there and looking so cold. Sirius needed something from him, anything more than the stony silence he was getting.

"Are you seriously still mad?" Sirius asked. "It was a scourgify, for fuck's sake. It's not like I hurt you. What was I supposed to do? Tell James, 'Sorry, can't curse him, we've been snogging like mad.'"

"You could have," Severus said, finally turning and looking at Sirius with chilling fury. Seeing that look and hearing exactly what he'd been beating himself up over snapped something inside him. His heart pounded so furiously that he could barely hear himself speak the desperate words that came next.

"You're a hypocrite," Sirius said. "You weren't exactly eager to tell anyone. You could barely handle being friends with Evans. You know it would have been so much worse if the Slytherins knew about us."

That was the wrong thing to say, too. It was all coming out wrong. He was angry and ashamed and whenever he'd felt that way before it was with his parents. He was used to attacking when he felt that way and he was struggling to turn that instinct off.

"Well, we don't have to worry about any of that anymore," Severus said. His eyes stayed locked on Sirius. "What a relief. You can leave now."

"I can't." Finally, something broke through the anger. He hovered closer to Severus, missing him so badly that his hand lifted of its own accord. "I can't start summer holidays with things like this. You know that I-"

Severus's wand came out and a spell Sirius had never heard fell from his lips. Sirius scarcely had time to puzzle over the incantation; the light lashed over his bicep. His skin split in a single burning moment and blood soaked his cut sleeve at an alarming rate.

"What the hell was that?" Sirius asked, stunned by the damage of such a shallow cut and that Severus had been the one to cast it. He reached for his wand to seal the cut; blood was dripping steadily down his arm and onto the train floor.

"You will never touch me again," Severus said and Sirius realized with a painful twist in his stomach that he was wasting his time. He'd ruined everything and if he'd ever had a chance to fix things, running his mouth in the compartment ensured he no longer did. He sealed the cut, leaving behind a thin scar, and took a moment to really look at Severus. His eyes were blazing now, not cold, and he gripped his wand, prepared to keep firing off hexes. It was the same look he wore when facing down James.

Sirius turned and fled. He went to the bathroom first, to scrub his arm and to clean and mend his

shirt. He stared at his reflection until he thought his eyes lost most of the wild look. Then he returned to the compartment where James, Remus, and Peter sat.

"Where were you?" James asked as he looked up from his hand of cards but distantly, politely.

"Getting dumped," he said as he threw himself into an empty seat.

"By who?" Peter asked as Remus and James shared a look that Sirius didn't care to figure out.

"Someone," Sirius said. He wanted sympathy but he did not want to bring Severus up to them, ever.

"Marceline," Remus said knowingly.

"Yeah," Sirius said. It was close enough to the truth.

"We knew you'd been acting funny," Peter said.

"A Slytherin?" James scrunched up his face. "Is that why you were so weird about Snivellus?"

"Yeah," Sirius was proud of himself for not flinching at the mocking name.

"You should've said, I thought you were losing your mind. Girls, I understand."

Normally, Sirius might have said something about James's complete lack of understanding of Lily Evans, the only girl James wanted. Sirius didn't care to bring her up, either. So he only curled in his seat and buried his head in his arms.

Chapter 8

August 1976

It was late and Sirius couldn't sleep. Most nights he barely stayed conscious through dropping down to the mattress on the bedroom floor. But sometimes his mind chose to needle him. Those nights he moved restlessly in his sheets and wished he hadn't promised Fleamont he wouldn't practice underage magic at their house anymore.

"Psst."

Sirius rolled over and found James propped up on an elbow, looking at him.

"You awake?" he asked.

"No," Sirius said. "I'm sleeping."

"Mum's not home." James turned his bedroom window which overlooked their front drive. "I've been watching. She hasn't come in."

"What do you think she's doing?"

"Something dangerous," James said. All summer, the Potters had stayed out late at night and left abruptly during the day. The four hadn't discussed it but James was convinced it had something to do with the war. More and more often, Daily Prophet headlines were filled with attacks and deaths.

"I'm sure she's alright," Sirius said eventually. James flopped down onto his pillows and stared at his ceiling.

"I don't think any of us are alright. Have you seen the Slytherins at school? Always meeting former students in Hogsmeade, whispering whenever they're together. They're all up to something." James paused. "Didn't Marceline ever say anything?"

"No. We didn't talk about anything like that." It was still bizarre to share things about Severus with James, even if James didn't know that he was. "She's not prejudiced, though."

"Are you sure about that? She was friends with Lily for a bit. You know Lily lives a few streets over? Marceline came summer after second year. I saw them in the Muggle shops sometimes. She always looked like she was holding herself back from retching. And now they don't talk, best as I can tell."

"Hmm," Sirius said, completely disinterested.

James misread his hum and groaned. "I can't believe you're still hung up on her."

"I'm not hung up," Sirius lied.

"Great," James said. "That means we need to find you someone else."

"No we don't. And what about you? You're not interested in anyone besides Evans."

"That's different, though. We grew up together."

The words hit a soft spot Sirius didn't know he had. He and Severus had grown up together, too, and Sirius had never appreciated that, not once. He'd hidden their friendship and then their relationship. James would have shouted it from the rooftop if Lily ever snogged him.

The Slytherin factor was a complicating one, admittedly. Sirius ran a hand over the scar on his arm and knew he shouldn't have let that matter. James forgave a seemingly nonsensical punch to the face; he would've forgiven dating Severus. Probably.

Not that Sirius would ever find out now.

November 1976 - Sixth Year

"What's that?" James asked and poked Sirius's arm. Sirius didn't have to look to know what he was talking about. He'd touched the scar so many times, reminding himself of all the ways he'd messed up.

Sirius finished toweling his hair and began to dress in his school robes. "A scar."

"I mean," James said with an overly annoyed sigh, "how did you get it? It wasn't there last year and you spent the summer with me." He bent forward and peered closer at the hypertrophic line. "Bet Pomfrey could get rid of it."

"No!" Sirius curled a protective hand around his arm. "No, no. I like it. Gives me character."

"Right. I'd say it would help with women but I know there's only one on your mind." James hesitated before asking, "Did you see her with Wilkes?"

He had, because he was always looking at the Slytherins, even though Severus was rarely among them. He showed up to classes at the last minute and ducked out before Sirius had time to pack up his bag. Sirius didn't even try to speak to him. He understood that Severus wanted to be left alone. A rather large part of him hoped that if he backed off now, Severus would forgive him later.

"Yeah," Sirius said eventually, when he realized he'd forgotten to answer and James was watching him with concern etched into his features.

"Here," James said suddenly and thrust out a hand. He held the game-winning snitch, fluttering valiantly against its confinement. "You have this."

Sirius took the snitch and pocketed it. He truthfully didn't care much about Quidditch anymore and he didn't care at all about having a snitch. He knew the gesture was James trying to comfort him so he accepted it without a word.

Remus and Peter waited for them when they emerged from the locker room. The four boys walked back up to the castle together.

December 1976

Sirius had been quite looking forward to his first Christmas with the Potters. James often went on about his pile of presents, the trips they took, and the great food his parents cooked. The reality ended up being far more bleak. Euphemia and Fleamont were absent most of the time, leaving the boys to entertain themselves. Sirius refused to go in the snow because it reminded him of all the hours he'd spent on the frozen Hogwarts grounds with Severus the prior year. That left them many hours to fill and not very many ways to fill them.

After Christmas Eve dinner, they sat on the living room floor shredding bits of paper in preparation for an undecided activity. Euphemia came flying down the stairs, pulling a hat over her graying hair. "There's an emergency," she said as she wound a scarf around her neck. "Your father - Fleamont and I have to go." She pulled her winter robe out of the front closet. "We may not be back tomorrow. Your presents are in our bedroom closet."

Fleamont trampled down as James leapt to his feet. "What's going on?"

"There's no time," Fleamont said. "Stay inside. Don't open the door to anyone. We're putting protective spells on the house."

They kissed James one at a time on the cheek and then turned to Sirius. He held himself still as they kissed his cheek too. It felt odd to be so close to an adult that wasn't his father enacting some form of mild violence. Fleamont, he noted, smelled of licorice.

Then they went out the front door and Sirius was left to stare at James as he paced the room.

The Potters returned three days later. They looked as exhausted and wrung out as James, who spent their absence growing progressively more neurotic. When they fell on each other in a group hug, Sirius moved to go up the stairs. James's arm flashed out and pulled him to his side.

"You're part of this family too," Euphemia said.

They refused to answer any questions about where they'd been. "You're too young," Fleamont said firmly and pulled out the untouched Christmas presents.

That night as they settled into their beds, James said, "It had something to do with You-Know-Who."

"You think they're off fighting his followers?" Death Eaters, he'd read in the paper and heard whispered back at Grimmauld Place.

"They might be. Or helping someone else do it. I need to hurry up and finish school so they'll let me do it too."

Sirius thought of the Potters rushing out the door, sacrificing their time and holidays and probably risking their lives. He was curious about Muggles and he certainly didn't hate them the way his parents wanted him to. But turning it all over in his mind, he wasn't sure if he cared enough to follow their path.

May 1977

Sirius was in bed, struggling to fall asleep, when he heard the small squeak of a drawer sliding open. He drew his curtains back slowly and watched Remus as he lifted the map out of James's nightstand.

"Where are you going?" he asked. Remus promptly dropped his wand. It rolled under James's bed and he knelt on the floor to retrieve it. Back on his feet, he turned to face Sirius, flushed and guilty looking.

"I thought everyone was asleep."

"You've been going on an awful lot of adventures with the map this year," Sirius said, quietly so as not to wake the others. "We already know your furry little problem, what are you hiding that's

worse than that?"

Remus looked down at the map and then back to Sirius. His brows stitched together as he stepped closer. "To tell you the truth, I have something I've been wanting to share with you." Remus sat on the edge of his bed. "Between the three of you, I think you'll understand. Especially since you were with Marcelline."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been...I don't know what to call it, really. Shagging someone? But I think I actually want to be with him. I never thought I should, with the werewolf thing. I somehow feel like he could handle it."

The more Remus rambled, so unlike him, the louder the alarm bells rang in Sirius's head. "Who is he?" he asked.

"It's, er, Snape," Remus said.

"You're fucking Snape." Awful images flooded his mind. He saw Remus touching skin only Sirius had touched and Severus kissing Remus when it should have been *him*.

"I know we haven't gotten along, and I know what he called Lily was awful," Remus said, fidgeting with the map. "But Lily forgave him. She told me there's more to Severus than we think. That's sort of what made me talk to him in the first place."

So Lily Evans was the matchmaker, after it was her fault for spurning James so often that he got jealous, and Remus's fault for standing there and doing nothing, and Severus's fault-

Sirius went cold all over as he remembered Severus standing in the corridor outside the headmaster's office and saying, *I'll get my own justice*.

The fucking bastard did it on purpose.

"I thought you would understand," Remus said quietly.

"I do understand," Sirius said with forced calm. "You're going to meet him now, then?"

"No I - actually, I wanted to make sure he was okay." A blush unfurled across his cheeks. "I was just, er, thinking about him. I don't like to see him right before the full moon. You know how I get."

The only thing that held Sirius back from jumping on Remus and pummeling his stupid red face was remembering that it was Severus who was really to blame.

"Yeah," was all Sirius said.

"Don't tell James and Peter, alright? If you're having a hard time, they'll probably kill me."

"Hm." How Remus reacted to that, Sirius didn't know. He laid back down and drew his curtains, unable to continue the conversation any longer.

Alone, Sirius festered in his rage. The longer he stayed in his bed, the worse he felt. His breath came shallow, his hands shook, and he felt his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest. All the memories of Severus that lived soft and comforting inside him turned frigid and sharp. Their first kiss on Severus's bed, their stolen weeks over Christmas break, their frantic gropings in

classrooms, and the one time Severus had fallen into a Transfigured bed with him. One time between them, and how many times had he given himself to Remus?

Sirius understood Severus wanted him to feel this way, and knowing that only drove him deeper into hate. A single charm didn't equate to fucking someone else, and his close friend at that. Whatever he'd done to Severus, it had been simply selfish. This was fucking malicious.

Sirius sat up, unable to contain the storm. He got out of bed, threw on a cloak, and walked out to the common room to brood. He nestled into the window seat, forehead to the glass, and stared out at the grounds. Moonlight fractured the night's darkness, illuminating clusters of trees and the glass roof of the greenhouses.

Moonlight. Sirius leaned away from the window as an idea wormed its way into his mind. He considered it, rage and adrenaline and misery trembling through his limbs, and then went up the tower to fetch parchment and quill. Bent over his nightstand, he focused singularly on the words that spilled out in a passing imitation of Remus's handwriting.

Sirius was in the owlery before he even realized he'd left the seventh floor. He called down an owl to attach the letter to its leg; it hooted and went back to sleep to await delivering the morning post.

He'd packed all his anger into the letter and in its place came a rush of exhaustion. He returned to the dorm and curled up in his bed fully clothed. When James tried to rouse him for classes, Sirius told him to fuck off.

He slept the day away and woke to James once again prodding his shoulder. "I don't know what crawled up your arse but it's a full moon. Remus needs us."

"Not tonight he doesn't," Sirius said, stifling a yawn.

"What are you on about?" James asked.

"Remus is going to be otherwise occupied."

"Sirius, if you don't-"

"I told Snape to meet him in the Shack." Admitting it felt delicious. The awful conjured images of Remus fucking Severus turned into much more palatable ones of Moony tearing him open and smearing his guts on the floorboards.

"Why the - what the - have you gone completely mad?" James scrambled over to Peter's bed and shook him roughly. "Peter, come with me, quickly. We've got to save Remus."

Sirius laughed, and was still laughing when they ran out of the dorm together. Then he turned over and went back to sleep.

In the morning, for the third time in 24 hours, he was once again pulled from sleep by James. This time James thumped his shoulder and Sirius woke with a yelp.

"Wassatfor?" he mumbled sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

"What do you think, you psychotic fuck? There really is something wrong with you." James towered over him, glaring. "Get up. Madam Pomfrey is checking over Remus and Professor Dumbledore wants us all in his office."

Sirius strolled up to the headmaster's office, James and Peter tense at his side, and found Remus

already seated opposite the desk, looking exhausted. He barely had time to settle into a chair before Severus walked in. Sirius snapped his head away. Just a second's glimpse flared everything up all over again - the fury, the hatred, the jealousy, the pain. He longed to smash Severus's face until everything was broken and bloody.

Professor Dumbledore gestured at the last open chair next to Peter. "Have a seat, please. I assume you know what this is about, and that you must not repeat any of this to anyone."

"Black tried to kill me," Severus said flatly. Sirius snorted in his chair.

"This is no laughing matter," Professor Dumbledore said, aiming a piercing stare directly at him. "You almost cost two lives last night, including someone I always thought to be your close friend."

"Two lives?" Sirius bit out. "No way that greasy snake would have killed Remus."

"The Ministry would have."

The words penetrated through to Sirius's rational mind, shaking it from its slumber. He remembered many conversations where Remus expressed fear of being captured as a dangerous beast. For the first time, a small stream of guilt slid through the rest of his explosive turmoil.

"I didn't think about that."

"It's very obvious that you didn't think at all," Professor Dumbledore said. There was no hint of the benign, smiling old man Sirius usually knew him to be. Just that quickly, in the face of disapproval, Sirius began to burn up again.

"Well, when I found out-" He stopped. He didn't want to come undone in front of Severus. The bastard would love it.

"Found out what?" Professor Dumbledore pressed. Sirius shook his head. "I will be honest with you, Mr. Black. This conversation is your only chance at escaping expulsion. If you are not willing to engage, if I don't see true remorse-"

Remorse. Fuck remorse. Where was Severus's? What he'd done - what he did -

"He fucked my best mate!" The words exploded out of him. "Did you know that? Out of the entire castle, he picked Remus! That wasn't an accident." He turned and looked at Severus and knew he would never feel so much, high or low, for any other person. "I know you, you conniving shit."

"What a stunning display of *remorse*," Severus drawled. His eyes glittered with satisfaction. He was loving being the harbinger of Sirius's suffering.

"You shut UP!" When Sirius moved forward, headmaster be damned, James jumped up and grabbed his arm.

"You've done enough," James said and shoved Sirius back down into his chair.

"What if I want Sirius expelled?" Remus asked quietly. The question punctured the ball of hatred clouding his mind. Sirius felt it all deflate.

"Remus...I am sorry, mate. Like I said, I didn't think anything would happen to you. I would never have sent Snape if I did."

"You did think, Sirius. You thought you'd use me as a weapon. Did you ever consider how I'd

feel, after I'd killed someone? When you know how much that thought haunts me. And you did it because I told you that Severus and I - you knew that and you sent him to be torn apart by me anyway?" Remus trailed off, the last few words little more than a whisper. Then he cleared his throat and steadied himself. "So, Professor Dumbledore. What if I want Sirius expelled?"

"Unfortunately Mr. Lupin, that power does not lie with you. You are right to feel exactly as you do but I have to consider all options from every angle." Professor Dumbledore looked at each boy in turn. "Although, I have spent the past nearly six years trying to lessen the animosity between you all. I confess I don't see many more options. Expulsion would be a very minimal punishment for what you did. Mr. Black."

"What if I take responsibility?" James asked. "I'll keep Sirius in line. No more harassing Snape, no more pranks or sneaking out or any of that. I'll keep him away from you too, Remus, if that's what you want."

"I think being Potter's property would be a reward, not a punishment," Severus cut in.

"I hate you," Sirius said but flatly. The conversation was suddenly draining. He wanted nothing more than to find out this was all a dream and wake up a day earlier with the chance to redo everything. He'd kill Severus himself and not drag Remus into it. Then Remus wouldn't look so shrunk in his seat; James wouldn't look so thunderous. He didn't give enough of a fuck about Peter to check how he looked.

"Hush," James snapped. "Professor?"

Professor Dumbledore considered Sirius for a long moment. Then he steepled his fingers and leaned closer.

"Mr. Black. This is your absolute last chance. If I hear you so much as dropped a dungbomb in class, you will be expelled immediately. I implore you to rely on Mr. Potter. He may be the only person left willing to act in your best interest."

After prescribing Sirius detention for the rest of term, Professor Dumbledore dismissed them all.

As soon as they stepped into the corridor, Remus called Severus's name. Sirius looked away. "Did you - can we talk?" Remus asked.

"I don't believe we have anything to talk about," Severus said. The most twisted part of Sirius enjoyed the rejection. Even if he'd made mistakes, even if he'd hurt Remus, at least he ruined something. At least he wasn't the only one suffering.

"Oh," Remus said, very quietly. "Alright."

Severus left them in the corridor, the four Gryffindors with a splintered friendship.

"I can't be around him," Remus told James. "I'm going to see if I can sleep in the hospital wing til summer." Then he was gone too.

James and Peter looked at each other before turning to Sirius. "What the absolute fuck was all of that?" James hissed. "You have that big of a problem with Remus shagging Snape, to try and kill both of them?"

"Don't tell me you're fine with it."

"It's none of my bloody business, or yours. Hell, Sirius. How is he so much worse than your little

Slytherin?"

Sirius wavered and almost spilled everything. If Peter hadn't been there, listening attentively, he would have. Since Peter was there, Sirius said nothing.

"You're my brother," James said, turning to leave Sirius alone in the corridor, "but right now you disgust me."

Chapter 9

July 1977

Fleamont looked around the tiny room with a strained smile. Immediately to his left stood a small refrigerator and a sink. In front of him, nearly close enough to touch, was a single bed shoved against the wall beneath a streaky window. Sirius stood pressed against the door to the equally cramped bathroom.

"Are you sure about this?" Fleamont asked. "We aren't concerned that you and James have had a fight. You're always welcome."

"It's not a fight," Sirius said. He was angry, standing there before Fleamont's distaste. He was always angry now. He hadn't stopped feeling out of control since he'd learned what Severus did. Rarely, shame would bubble up alongside the rage. It wasn't too difficult for him to brush it away.

"Then what happened? You can talk to me."

Fleamont looked so much like James - same deep brown skin, same flashing dark eyes behind a pair of glasses, same coiled hair. Sirius looked like his father, too, but Orion wasn't patient and understanding like Fleamont. Was that why Sirius had turned out so much worse than James?

"Our friend Remus? He's a werewolf. I told his boyfriend where to find him on the full moon." *And hoped he'd die.*

Fleamont spent a long moment watching him with a carefully blank face. "Why did you do that?"

"Because," Sirius said, feeling a surge of fury and adrenaline yet again, "he was mine first."

"You and Remus?" Fleamont didn't stop his eyebrows from lifting.

"No. His - Snape. James has mentioned him to you before, hasn't he? We met when we were nine..."

The whole story spilled out of Sirius, landing awkwardly in the space between them, which seemed to grow wider with each word. Fleamont remained remarkably expressionless as he heard about Tobias, their ill-fated fifth year fling, Sirius hexing Severus, and the thing Sirius had done which he wasn't regretting yet.

"...really all his fault," Sirius finished. Sometime during the hate-fueled rant, Fleamont turned away to stare out the window. Now he turned back, rubbing the tip of his nose.

"I can see why you and James think some time apart will help."

Sirius felt the very powerful urge to attack the man before him and an equally strong pulse of regret for opening up.

"Don't tell him any of that."

"Of course not." Fleamont cast one more sweeping look over the room. "You'll write if you need anything, won't you?"

"Yeah," Sirius lied. Fleamont twitched like he was going to offer a hug but then pulled his arms

back to his side.

"Let us know if you want a visit," he said and eased his way out of the front door, which only opened halfway before hitting the sink.

Now his relationship with the Potters was another thing Severus cost him.

Sirius turned on the spot and Apparated. His feet slammed into pavement but he managed to stay upright. The Snape house stood before him, looking as ugly and awful as he felt. Sirius spelled the door open and pushed his way in. He flicked lights on as he walked room to room, looking over everything.

In the living room he spotted the blue floral sofa Eileen liked to sit on while darning socks. He and Severus would sit on the carpet while she worked and listen to stories about her time in Hogwarts. The lumpy cushions were dusty now, looking like they hadn't been touched in years.

He walked next to the kitchen, where there was hardly ever any food, and the window in the half bath, cracked from the time Sirius stumbled into it, head first. Severus had taken the blame, and a beating, for that.

Upstairs, he went to Severus's room. It looked lived in, but only just. A thin blanket and rumpled sheets topped his bed. The window was half-open, like the ghost of an invitation to the 10-year-old that used to crawl through it.

Standing in the room was painful. That unmade bed was where he'd kissed Severus for the first time, so young and full of stupid hope. Was that where everything started going wrong?

Sirius went back downstairs and leaned against the short wall dividing the kitchen and living room. Then he pulled out his wand and waited, thrumming with the possibility of revenge.

When Severus eventually walked through the front door, he had the look of someone who had just been crying. Tenderness flared up inside him; Sirius quickly stomped it back down. What right did he have to pretend to care about Severus's pain? He would have done a lot more than cry if Sirius's attempt to send him into the Shrieking Shack hadn't been thwarted.

In the dim room, lit only by stray afternoon light, they faced each other.

"Come to kill me?" Severus asked, voice hoarse.

"I should. You ruined my life."

"I - *what*?"

"Remus won't talk to me. James does but it's like he's my mum, not my mate. Peter's a bootlicker as usual but unsurprisingly that doesn't make me feel any better." The more he talked, the easier it was to remember why he was angry.

"And I caused any of that, how?" Severus was infuriatingly unrepentant, standing there and not even bothering to draw his wand. He must think looking so heartbroken and beautiful would protect him.

Sirius crossed and grabbed Severus by the collar of his Muggle shirt. It was the closest they'd been in so long, without watching housemates. Severus had grown taller but so had Sirius. It was easy to pull him in and sneer down at him. "You should've forgiven me for the fucking Scourgify," he spat. "You shouldn't have fucked Remus."

"I'm not sorry," Severus said. Of course he fucking wasn't. Sirius wasn't sorry either, or if he was he refused to admit it.

"I hate you. I hate you so fucking much."

"I hate you too."

Sirius pulled Severus forward and claimed his lips for his own. Alongside the anger, something warm and gentle flooded him. The kiss felt like his bed at Grimmauld Place, cozy and familiar. Still, he forced himself to be rough and mean about it. He wouldn't let Severus know how easily he soothed the storm inside him.

He bit at the soft skin on Severus's neck until he was a whimpering mess, undone within Sirius's arms, and then Sirius pulled him upstairs with another whispered, "I hate you."

He said it again and again as he touched Severus's naked body because he meant it, and he didn't, and he hated both sides. When he slid his hand over Severus's chest, had Remus done that too? Had he fisted a hand in Severus's hair as he fucked him, driving strangled moans out of him, just like Sirius did? Had he wanted to take Severus and hide him away and live just the two of them, forever?

"You don't really hate me, do you?" Severus whispered when they were finished. Sirius moved to get on top of him, soothing words at the tip of his tongue. He swallowed them down and instead grabbed Severus's wrists.

"I really do," Sirius growled into his ear. Liar. It was an infuriating fact that even after everything, Severus owned so much of him. Sirius used that anger and humiliation to fuel his words. "I know you don't. You're obsessed with me, always have been. If I snapped my fingers you'd come running, begging for it. Wouldn't you?"

He was trying so hard to break Severus, to make him feel even a fraction of what Sirius felt. Severus only looked up at him defiantly. That was what drove Sirius mad, knowing Severus didn't even care enough to get angry.

"Why did you come here?" Severus asked.

Sirius let go of his hands. He couldn't take it anymore. It had been an awful idea to come and every second that he stayed made it worse. He rushed to pull his robes back on as more vitriol spilled out.

"To prove that I could. Now I know how pathetic you are, how pathetic you'll always be. I tried to kill you and you still let me fuck you." *And I still wanted to fuck you, and if you hadn't ruined me I'd be in that bed holding you.*

"You didn't have to kiss me."

Sirius shrugged, hoping the nonchalance hid the fact that kissing Severus had been the best thing he'd done in over a year. "No. I didn't."

Sirius left and walked the familiar streets of his childhood, weaving knots with his tangled emotions. He went over to his parents' house; he could still see it. They hadn't changed Orion from Secret Keeper to remove him from the Fidelius Charm, then. He wondered if they had other protections to keep him out. Maybe they hoped he'd come back one day.

If they did, it was as fruitless a hope as Sirius wishing Severus would be his again. He turned from the house and spun all the way around to Apparate back to the flat. Small and lonely, it was all the

space and company that he could handle.

September 1977 - Seventh Year

Sirius sat alone on the train. During the feast he selected a spot at the end of the bench next to a cluster of fourth years. He kept his back to Slytherin table and focused on his empty plate.

The meal ended and, though he dawdled, he found himself in the dorm with his three former friends. He caught the cautious look tossed between them when he walked in but ignored it and went straight to his trunk to pull out his pajamas.

"How was your summer?" James asked. The words cracked through the stilted silence and Sirius, who rarely startled, dropped his pajama bottoms.

"Oh," he said and turned around. They all sat on their beds still in their robes, watching him. "It was fine. How was yours?"

"I'm really asking." James glanced over at Remus. "I've been worried about you."

Sirius looked, too. Remus met his gaze steadily. There was a harsh set to his jaw that Sirius had never seen before. He also looked incredibly worn out.

"I need you there during the full moon," Remus said, in a way that made it very obvious it was difficult for him to get the words out. "James and Peter came this summer. I tried to kill them both."

"We think we're a pack," Peter said. "The four of us."

"Or maybe it was just you calming him all along," James added. "The canine thing."

Remus's face twisted, distaste for that theory evident. He wasn't the only one. Looking at Remus, he regretted what he'd done, but a part of him also hated Remus, even if that wasn't fair.

"I'll be there. We don't have to be friends for that," Sirius said.

"Are you saying you don't want to be?" Peter asked.

"Peter, I never wanted to be your friend in the first place. You're a hanger-on, nothing more. And I'm fine without all of you. I'll be there at the full moon. Leave it at that." Sirius turned his back on them, finished changing, and got into bed.

It had been years since James climbed into Sirius's bed. He did it that night, hours later. There was barely enough room for them to squish onto opposite ends.

"What's going on?" James asked, quietly but still loud enough that Remus and Peter would be able to hear if they were awake. "Last year, this summer, just now. I don't even know who you are anymore. My dad told me you're having a hard time. I want to help."

Sirius shook his head. "Not here."

"The common room?"

Five minutes later they sat in armchairs facing each other. Sirius looked around the room and remembered other, better nights. Had it really been five years ago that they knelt at the window watching Remus limp in after a full moon?

“So?” James prompted.

“So what?”

“What’s your problem?”

“Not the most sympathetic way to ask,” Sirius said and James’s mildly annoyed patience turned to anger.

“You tried to kill someone, Sirius, and you used Remus to do it.” Even heated, he kept his voice low to avoid being overheard. “And now you’re not even sorry. You’re being a...a...*dickhead*.”

“That’s because I’m a bad person. It’s that simple. I do feel badly, but I also don’t feel badly at all. Some things deserve a harsh response.”

“Do you mean Remus or Snape?” James spoke like every word Sirius said was driving them further apart.

“I mean me! I mean, stop talking to me. Stop trying to fix things. I hate Snape and I hate all of you. Isn’t that enough for you to leave me alone?”

There was a lengthy silence. Sirius waited for James to get up and walk away. Instead, eventually, he reached out and put a hand on each of Sirius’s shoulders. “I love you, Sirius Black. Whatever’s going on. You can’t push me away.”

Sirius absorbed the words, examined them in his mind. No one had ever expressed that kind of thing to him. He had, in fact, successfully pushed away his parents and his brother and Severus. They hadn’t even fought that hard to keep him close. Now here was James, embracing the beast inside him, fighting to tame it.

“Okay,” Sirius said, crumbling. “What do you want me to do?”

December 1977

When Sirius fucked Severus, he held silent conversations in his head, as if they were friends or lovers again.

One day it was: *My day was awful, thanks. James is still furious with me for quitting the team, says Knight is a horrible replacement. He told me I need to quit punishing myself. After all this time, he still has no idea that I don’t give a niffler’s arse about Quidditch anymore.*

Another: *What were you and Blanchet laughing about in Potions today? Why are you spending all your time with the Slytherins? Are you ever lonely? Do you ever miss me, actually knowing me and not fumbling around in classrooms?*

And yet another day: *I still find you so beautiful, you know. I never told you that. I want to get one of those portraits done of you like my parents loved so much. I could talk to that version of you, and stare at you all day.*

Out loud, he only mumbled curse words against Severus’s throat. There was little point in saying anything else. He had no idea how he’d finagled being able to touch Severus again, after everything he’d done and the hateful poison he’d whispered over the summer. So he stayed quiet and took what he could have.

It was the end of the quarter when Sirius stepped out of a classroom, Severus close behind, and found James, clutching the map and wearing the expression of a disapproving mother.

"You promised not to fight him anymore," James said quietly.

Sirius looked away, afraid James would see something in his face and figure out what they'd been doing. "I know, I know, but..."

But I need him.

He looked at Severus, cold and sneering, on the verge of striding away.

"I know," Sirius said. "You're right. We'll - I'll stop."

He followed James around a corner. He could feel the echoes of Severus on him, his perpetually-cold hands and his deliciously warm mouth and how he distracted Sirius from thinking about all the ways he'd ruined his own life.

"How did that happen?" James asked as they climbed the stairs to the fourth floor.

"Dunno. We weren't fighting. Not really. It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it. Want to finish the Potions reading?"

He didn't meet up with Severus again. He'd come too close to admitting everything to James, who might insist he would stick by Sirius's side through anything, but everyone had limits. His twisted obsession pushed Fleamont away. There was no reason to think it wouldn't do the same to his son.

June 1978

Sirius dragged his luggage up the steps of the Hogwarts Express, each thud an unintentional repetition of the first time he climbed onto the train. He turned to head toward the front of the train where compartments tended to be empty but was stopped by a hand on his elbow.

"We're sitting there," James said with a nod towards the back. Sirius looked past him to see Peter and Remus paused in the corridor, regarding him distantly, like he was an uncle they didn't particularly like but had to visit on holidays. Lily Evans stood with them too, proof that everyone else got what they wanted.

Sirius followed them to a compartment and took a seat next to the window. While the others chatted, he ran through all the things he needed to do once they got to London. He needed more money from his, formerly Uncle Alphard's, vault in Gringotts, and to find a flat to rent, and to decide if he wanted to do something with his life or waste it away.

He eventually fell asleep. James shook him awake when they stopped at King's Crossing.

"Are you sure you won't come stay with me?" James asked. Sirius kept looking out the window. "My parents would love to see you. And, you know, the things they've been doing. They could use some help."

Sirius often forgot the wizarding world was in the middle of a war. He didn't read the papers and he didn't particularly care about anyone that had died. He started to say no when he caught sight of Severus approaching the curb. His heart lurched and for a moment, perhaps due to temporary insanity, he imagined leaping off the train and going after him. What did any of it matter anymore?

School was over. They could fix things. They hadn't orbited each other so long for nothing.

As Sirius watched, a sleek black car pulled up in front of Severus. Lucius Malfoy stuck his head out the back window. He seemed much older and more tired than he had at the wedding. The warm look he aimed at Severus reignited the jealousy Sirius had spent so much time tranquilizing the past year.

"Aren't the Malfoys Death Eaters?" Sirius asked. He watched Severus step around the car and open the door.

"From what I've heard," James said. "Rumors, mostly. That's part of what my parents - what the whole group, really, is working on. Identifying Death Eaters and taking them down, one way or another."

The car pulled away. Sirius stood and faced James.

"I'm in."

Chapter 10

January 1980

Sirius glanced over to his left, where Remus sat, and then to his right, where Peter leapt out of his seat to grab Lily in a hug.

"Well done, you two." Sirius turned and slung an arm around James's shoulder. "Do you know if it's a boy or girl?"

"The mediwizards said a boy." Lily rubbed a hand over her belly, which drew attention to the fact that it was not as flat as it had been the last time they'd seen each other.

"A boy," Sirius repeated. Images spun on a reel in his head - a tiny little head topped by a shock of curly hair, a toddler running through the grass while Sirius playfully chased after him, a boy begging to stop for an ice cream while shopping for school things. "Incredible."

"Do you really think so?" James asked.

"Of course I do."

"We're going to put an announcement in the paper," Lily said with a fond look towards James. "We think good news needs to be shared right now."

They spent the rest of dinner talking about the baby and plans for the nursery. Lily and James were learning how to deliver at home in case St. Mungo's became unsafe before July, when the baby was due.

Lily begged off the meal early due to exhaustion. Peter stayed behind with James to coordinate a drop off of Pepper-ups he'd brewed. Remus and Sirius stepped out into the cool air of Godric's Hollow.

"Fancy a drink?" Sirius asked, stupidly because Remus had never said yes in nearly two years of invitations.

"Not tonight." Remus looked up at the moon and the bright scattering of pinpoints among the dark winter sky. "The moon is full in two days."

"Right, I know. I'll be there."

Remus shook his head. "Not this time. Dumbledore's asked me to be somewhere."

"During the moon? But - oh, right." They stopped outside the anti-apparition wards James had set up. "Well, take care of yourself, Moony."

A smile tugged on Remus's face at the old nickname and for a moment they felt like friends again. Sirius thought that if they weren't on the cusp of certain death and busy with more important things, they would've fully patched things up. He didn't look at Sirius like he was a pile of dung anymore, for one, and sometimes he even laughed at Sirius's stupid jokes.

"I always do," he said and bumped his shoulder into Sirius's. They Disapparated at the same time, creating overlapping cracks.

Sirius stumbled into a brick wall as he landed in the familiar alley. He lurched forward to stay upright and as he did his foot dragged against a metal bin, knocking it down and sending refuse skittering across the dirt. He'd had probably a few too many drinks at dinner, but that never stopped him before.

He couldn't say exactly when he'd started hoarding bottles of Firewhiskey, or sneaking shots out of the liquor cabinet whenever he visited James, or coming to this Muggle pub nearly every night because the drinks were incredibly cheap. He thought it might have been after he watched a Death Eater slice a Muggle child from throat to hip during a botched counterattack. The parents they'd saved and Obliviated, which meant erasing their daughter's death alongside any memory of the magical duel they'd witnessed. At first, Sirius thought it was a kindness. Then James had shown him the Muggle papers - headlines of the missing girl, reprinted photos, quotes from the parents begging for her safe return.

Sirius didn't think about that as he entered the pub. The inability to focus on much at all was why he liked drinking.

He ordered a tray of drinks and brought them to a booth. It wasn't long before Heather sat down across from him. She worked at the pub and when it was slow, she would sit with him, usually to ensure he was cut off when he'd had too much.

"Going all out tonight," she said with a pointed look at his assortment of glasses.

"My brother's having a baby," he said.

"Is he? How medicine has advanced."

"Hilarious." Sirius offered her a shot and when she refused, he downed it himself.

"Rob taught me a game earlier, want to see?" They wadded up straw wrappers and took turns flicking them through finger-goalposts. Heather was rather skilled and he was rather terrible.

"You're not very good at this," she said after one wrapper shot past her and hit a patron in the ear.

"You've got me there." He took another drag of beer to hide his grin from the Muggle looking for the source of the paper attack. "I have other talents, though."

"Parroting cliches being one of them?" she asked, smirking. He looked at her and then quickly past her when the movement of someone sitting at the bar drew his attention. There was no way - *here*, now?

He strode to the bar, heart hammering. The closer he got the less he could deny what he was seeing. Severus Snape, Death Eater, in jeans at a Muggle bar, as much a walking heartbreak as he'd ever been.

"Don't serve him," Sirius growled to Rob. Anger pulsed through him, and fear and longing. "He's known to run out on a tab."

Severus turned and they stared at each other. Sirius tried to convey *I hate you* with his glare even as his traitorous heart leapt inside his chest and screamed, *mine*.

He dragged an unresisting Severus out to the alley he'd Apparated into and shoved him against the brick. He jabbed his wand into Severus's neck, thinking how evil he was, and how beautiful.

"I should kill you right here," Sirius snarled, and that was true. If any Order member ever found out

he'd let a Death Eater escape - not that they knew Severus was, he'd never told about him getting into the car with Lucius -

"Go on," Severus said coldly, interrupting Sirius's jumbled thoughts. He stood limp against the wall while his expression battled between fury and disdain. "You'll never get another easy shot like this."

He pictured it: Stunning him, dragging him to the Order, watching while they interrogated him through increasingly painful means. After a few moments of inaction, he let go. "I can't. Even though you deserve it. Get out of here."

"No," Severus said and shifted closer, his hands fisting into Sirius's sleeves, like it was something he'd done a hundred times before. When their lips found each other, something snapped inside him, a dam of tension built over the years and finally broken to dissipate. He felt more at peace pressed against a Death Eater than he had in years. That fact enraged him.

"You're a piece of shit," Sirius said into Severus's mouth.

"I know."

"I still hate you so much." *Liar*, a voice in his head taunted.

"I know."

"Do you know how many of my friends are dead because of you?"

"None."

"Bullshit," Sirius said. "I'm going to fuck you; you don't have to lie."

"I'm not lying," Severus said. "I haven't killed anyone. I barely leave Malfoy Manor. They have me brewing Potions and inventing spells."

"And what do you think they use those potions and spells for, you dumb bastard?"

"I know."

Sirius was tired of talking, tired of spitting vitriol for a reaction while Severus just took it meekly. It wasn't like him to be so non-responsive. Maybe they'd changed too much and he didn't know him at all anymore. But Sirius knew his mouth, knew what it felt like to run his tongue along Severus's neck, and to hold his warm, hard cock.

They stripped down to nothing. Severus knelt there in the dirt and that alone nearly undid Sirius, that he was so willing and desperate he'd let Sirius fuck him in a filthy alley. Sirius prepped him hurriedly and when he finally sank in, he could have cried, if he let himself. He should've had years and years of this, not a handful of times. Now there was a war between them and it was too late.

When they'd finished and began to untangle their limbs, for half a second he wished they were in a bed and could fall asleep holding each other.

But they couldn't. Sirius grabbed his own clothes and kicked Severus's away. "Wait til I'm gone," he said. "I don't want you to follow me."

"Can I owl you?" Severus asked and, having never extinguished, the flame of anger burned

brightly once again.

“Merlin, you’re pathetic as always. Why would you want to, Snape? Why do you want any of this? What is wrong with you?”

Severus stayed naked on the dirt and shrugged. “I doubt both of us will last the year. Either the Dark Lord will gain full control of the Ministry and you’ll be executed as a blood traitor or he’ll be defeated and I’ll be executed for war crimes.” Severus had never been the kind to ramble. Now the words poured out of him, half-desperate, half-beseeching. “I’ve been coming here and watching you, you know. I saw you by chance one day and placed a tracking charm. I already know all the places you go and people you associate with.”

The threat clawed through him. *I could destroy you and everyone you know in a second*, he might as well have said. “You-”

“I didn’t tell anyone.” He was all beseeching now. Sirius was pretty sure he could kick him in the mouth and Severus would say thank you through bloody teeth.

“What do you expect me to say?” Sirius asked. “Thanks for not helping your friends murder me?”

“I thought you should know.” Severus’s face sealed off and the moment nearly passed. Sirius could see exactly what he should do: Apparate away, figure out how to undo the tracking charm, and forget they’d ever seen each other. He saw other flashes, too: five minutes earlier when he’d held Severus by the hips, three years earlier when they snuck into classrooms together even after they’d destroyed each other, and years earlier when Sirius first decided he needed Severus to be his, even if he hadn’t known it in those words.

“You know what’s really pathetic?” Sirius threw the clothes to Severus, who began to dress. “When I saw you at the bar, I felt relieved. I’ve always wondered if you were dead or not. You’re never at any of the attacks and no one’s seen you since Hogwarts. I’ve been checking the newspaper for your name.”

He stopped then, thinking of all the times he had scanned the obituaries. There had been names he didn’t want to see - Fleamont and Euphemia chief among them - but never, at least, *Severus Snape*. He closed the distance between them and ran his hands along Severus’s jaw. The touch made his eyes shut, dark lashes falling over pale cheeks.

“Why do I want any of this?” Sirius murmured, mostly to himself. “What’s wrong with me?”

His lips found Severus’s, gentle and soft now, like they’d never come to hate each other at all.

“I’m sorry,” Severus said when Sirius, reluctantly, pulled back. It was the first apology he could remember between them. “So…” The word slithered between them and Sirius let it swallow his last bit of resistance.

“I’ll figure something out. Can you meet me here tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” Severus said. “If I’m not here, maybe every Wednesday we can try? Until we run into each other again.”

“Yeah. Alright.” For a moment, Sirius wanted to grab him again. He wanted to take him back to his flat, hide him there, keep him safe and out of whatever the Death Eaters were getting him into. He couldn’t do that so instead he Disapparated away.

Chapter 11

January 1980

Sirius pushed the glass closer to Severus. Severus covered it with his palm and pushed it back. "You're drunk enough for us both," he said, his eyes fixed on Sirius's mouth.

"Impossible," Sirius said. "I'm not even drunk enough for me." He drained the glass he'd tried to pass off and then reached across the table. His fingers slid over Severus's, up the back of his hand, and trailed up his arm. When he found Severus's lips, he stilled, stroking the soft skin there as Severus's lids fluttered. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Severus's eyes flew open at that and he glared, pulling back. "Funny."

"I'm not joking. Did I never tell you that before? I used to watch you across the Great Hall just because I liked looking at you. Oh, and because I was incredibly jealous of Blanchet."

"You're misremembering," Severus said. "I watched you all the time. I would've noticed."

"Come off it! I was always staring, trying to get your attention, and you hardly ever looked over."

Severus looked away. "What are we doing?"

"Whatever you want."

When they were in bed, Sirius drew Severus close like he'd wanted to in the alley, and as they shifted together he spotted black lines across the inside of Severus's forearm.

"What's that?" he asked, reaching. His fingers curled around Severus's arm and he flipped it over to see a dark imprint of a skull with a snake for its tongue. He brushed his fingers over it but snatched his hand back when it singed, like touching a hot cauldron. "What *is* that?"

"You don't want to know," Severus said, turning his arm back to pale skin and a thin patch of arm hair. Sirius touched him there, appreciating that it didn't burn him. He tried to hold back the words scratching at his throat. He had Severus in his bed again and he knew how easily that could change. He wasn't sure if they would both survive another falling apart.

"Why did you join them?" eventually spilled out. "You're Muggleborn."

"They were nice to me," Severus said. "They complimented me. It's pathetic, in retrospect, but it's the truth. Wilkes said I was powerful."

"That's not a compliment. That's a statement of fact."

"You never said it." Severus shifted away to stare at the ceiling. "Not to me, and you would never have said it in front of your entire house, like he did to ours."

"I didn't say a lot of things I should have." Sirius rested his chin on Severus's shoulder so that his lips brushed jawline as he spoke. "I never told you how much I need you." He pressed a kiss to Severus's cheek and then briefly covered his lips. "How much I adore you." He slid over and straddled Severus, looking down at him stretched out across the bed. His hair splayed off to one side, a slash of black against the white pillowcase, and his eyes looked nearly closed as he avoided

making eye contact. "I said so many things I didn't mean, and never told you what mattered."

"Well," Severus said, distantly, like he didn't believe a word he was hearing, "you're telling me now."

April 1980

James paced across the carpet of the sitting room while Lily leaned against the doorframe, a hand pressed to her mouth below sorrowful eyes.

"A prophecy?" Peter asked from his spot on the sofa. "What prophecy? How did Dumbledore hear this?"

"He wouldn't tell us," James said. "He said he has a, 'confidential but reliable source.' You-Know-Who thinks our son is going to be his enemy."

"That's ridiculous," Remus said, bewildered. "Why would he be afraid of a baby? Why would he believe it means Harry?"

"The prophecy said something about a baby born in July, and he saw our stupid pregnancy announcement." Lily kept her fingers pressed to her lips as she spoke, as if she could hold the words in and that would stop them from being true.

"What are you going to do about it?" Sirius asked. He was relieved that they'd been told, finally, and that he could ask the questions drumming through his mind ever since Severus stumbled into his flat, babbling about Voldemort killing Lily's child.

"For now, Dumbledore told us to lay low. He said to limit who we invite over and that sort of thing. He's looking into other avenues." James looked around the room. "Everyone in here I trust with my life, and Lily's and our son's." He focused on Sirius. "Everyone."

Sirius knew without James, he would not be in that room, or any room, being told such a thing. He'd used Remus and disliked Peter and fought James but there he was, trusted and included. And Voldemort was trying to take it all away.

"I'll die before anything happens to your family," Sirius said and something blazed in James's face as his jaw set.

"I know."

"Well," Lily said, a forced cheeriness in her voice, "let's hope it doesn't come to that."

July 1980

On the 31st of July, Sirius received two owls. The first one was a hastily scribbled note informing him that Lily had given birth and that they would send another note when he could visit. Sirius poured himself a celebratory drink and drank it in the kitchen. Then he had several more.

He was quite sloshed by the time the next owl arrived. It was a short missive in neat, swirling handwriting - his mother's, he recognized, even after so much time. It said only: *Regulus is dead. Come home.*

The next day he went to see James and Lily and met his godson, Harry. The day after that he went to brag about Harry to Severus and steal a few hours together. They'd quite perfected hiding away in his well-protected flat and pretending that nothing existed outside of those walls.

It was the third day after receiving the note that he Apparated to Grimmauld Place. The houses towered imposing as ever, sparkling facades and carefully clipped lawns. His own house stretched across its lot as he approached it, still visible to him after five years away.

He paused on the doorstep and after a moment of dithering pushed the door open without knocking. It was eerie to walk through the halls and find nothing changed - the same mounted elf heads, the same sullen portraits, the same polished tile and smooth stone.

He found his parents in Regulus's room. Objects were strewn around the room - a broomstick, textbooks, dress robes, sheafs of parchment - and a packing box sat opened between them.

"What did you want?" Sirius asked and was reluctantly impressed that neither of them jumped.

Orion turned and Walburga followed slightly slower. They looked much more than five years older. His father's hairline had drawn back and his mother's black braid had gray wisped through it. They both wore black crepe mourning robes that fell stiffly against their bodies.

"Sirius," Orion said, and that was all.

"You missed his pyre," Walburga said, sounding nothing like herself. The haughty condescension was replaced with a detached flatness. "You should scatter his ashes. We also need to make arrangements for your inevitable inheritance.

"I don't want it. I don't want anything from you. I don't know why I bothered coming."

"You loved him," Walburga said. Her voice caught at the end. She cleared her throat. "He was your brother."

"I really didn't. How'd he die? Got wrapped up in Voldemort's shit?" These people were not his parents; they were masquerading husks. Their weakness fed the anger always simmering inside him.

"Is it not enough, Sirius?" Orion asked. "Regulus is dead and you may as well be. The wizarding world burns around us and we have nothing. Will you never be satisfied with our suffering?"

"Were you ever satisfied with mine?"

"When did we ever take pleasure in your trials, as you are in ours?" Orion was slowly drifting closer, his eyes snapped to Sirius with an expression that was hard to discern - fierce and frail and faraway. Walburga stayed frozen next to the box they'd been filling. "We need to know if you will honor your family and scatter his ashes. That's all we ask."

"Where?" Sirius asked, though he had no reason to do anything they wanted.

"Tradition indicates the Ganges," Walburga said, still flat. "International Portkeys are difficult to get right now, and it would take days by floo. Perhaps the Thames, or Severn river."

"Severn," Sirius repeated, something darkly amusing in the idea of putting his brother in a river named nearly the same as his lover. "No, the Thames will work. Give me the ashes."

An hour later, he squatted on a riverbank, marsh grass reaching nearly his shoulders as he dug into

his pocket and pulled out the velvet pouch Orion had pressed into his hand. He loosened the drawstring and upended the contents over the water. Ash tumbled out and clumped on the smooth surface, then darkened with dampness before disintegrating all together. He dropped the pouch too and stood to back away from the turbulent depths.

There was no moment of introspection, no grief or regret. He knew Regulus as flashes of petulance at home and sour looks across the Great Hall, and it would've stayed that way if he'd lived a hundred more years. So many others had died that were far more worthy of life. The Potters, he thought, but only quickly because thinking of them still tore at something tender inside him.

Sirius climbed up the bank and then, on steady ground, Disapparated.

Chapter 12

July 1981

A witch in an overly heavy cloak hurried through the streets, hunched into herself. Posters on the windows fluttered as she moved past them, flashing WANTED in large lettering above a dreadfully long list of names. Diagon Alley was otherwise still and empty. Most of the shops were boarded up and the few that remained open were guarded by wizards clutching their wands, poised to defend by any means necessary.

Sirius turned to the side as the witch approached him, giving her room to slip by. Her arm brushed his side and she abruptly stopped. A cold burn bloomed in his ribs and spread quickly through the bones, lacing agony throughout his chest. He pressed one hand to his sternum, gasping, while the other plunged for his wand.

"For the Dark Lord," she hissed and Sirius recognized her but his mind could not claw forth her name. He pulled his wand out, choking on the pain, but she was gone, slipped into a nearby alleyway by the time he straightened his arm.

He pushed his wand into his chest and tried *Episkey*, but his throat was closed and no sound came out. The shops around him blurred. He fell to his knees, scrabbling for his lungs, as if he could pierce the skin and dig out the damage.

Sirius barely registered the hand closing on his arm; the world tilted as he was dragged back and he lacked the breath to resist. His wand slipped from his twitching fingers and rolled across the cobblestones. His eyes fell shut.

When they opened again, he was stretched out across a counter. His back was chilled but his lungs were blessedly clear. He pushed himself up to his elbows, gulping in air, reveling in his regained ability to breathe.

"They nearly got you," came a voice from his left and Sirius turned to find Florean Fortescue on a wooden stool, holding out Sirius's wand. He slid off the unstocked ice cream counter and took it.

"Thank you."

"You best be careful. That's their latest trick, stabbing people with these cursed blades. Had two die from it last week, only reason I had a potion on hand to help." Florean pushed his hands against his knees as he stood. "What foolishness brought you here?"

"It's my godson's first birthday. I want to get him a gift."

Florean made a noise of distaste. "Birthday gifts. His gift is being alive, and you too, though you won't make it much longer if you take risks like this."

Sirius Disapparated straight from the ice cream shop and to the hall outside his flat, Florean's words looping in his thoughts. Each clear breath still felt a delicious contrast to his blocked lungs, and he turned over in his mind how easily he could have died.

He was, frankly, not that worried about the possibility. It had become exhausting, staying holed up for weeks at a time, watching Muggle television and reading Wizard obituaries and going slowly but surely insane. The last time he'd been out of the house was months earlier to become the

Potters' Secret Keeper and his life had effectively ended then.

But if he died, the Fidelius Charm ended. If the charm ended, the Potters would be found. Once they were found, they were as good as dead.

They were good as either way. He was more convinced of that than ever. He couldn't even walk down a street without being attacked, and he couldn't maintain this self-isolation unendingly. He would lose his life and they would lose theirs.

It was a thought he'd spun around so many times that he already had each curve memorized. The futility of his efforts, the stupidity of the plan, the way it was going to feel when he found out the one person that always stuck by him was dead. Harry, dead, but that horrible fate was prophesied, wasn't it? Lily, dead, but how could a mother live without her child?

James, dead - that he couldn't excuse or accept. Surely James could move on. Others had.

His own thoughts made him sick. The reality of the wizarding world crumbling around him made him panicked. He did his best to ignore the one terrible solution that kept knocking, insisting on being acknowledged.

October 1981

The pink sandstone walls had not changed in the years since Sirius last saw them, nor the scalloped arches or sculpted railings. But now a thin layer of dust coated the tiles that used to gleam under sunlight. The kitchen was empty of house elves and there was no boiling pot of something delicious to perfume the air. All the beds were stripped of their linens; all the curtains had been taken down.

Sirius finished his tour with the bedroom he'd always slept in. He knelt by the bed and tugged out his childhood wicker basket. He'd charmed it undetectable in his youth out of shame and a thirst to avoid punishment. The items rolled as he tilted the basket to check its contents. He pulled them out and tossed them over his shoulder. They clattered on the tile floor and rolled in all directions. Then he reached into his robes and pulled out the things he now wanted to protect: the Hogsmeade snow globe, the long-defunct snitch, and the letter he'd received two weeks earlier.

No matter what happened to him, he'd exist in these three things, the representations of everything he cared about and how he'd go to any length to keep what was his. He pressed the objects into the wicker, replaced the lid, and stowed it back under the bed.

He found Bellatrix out on one of the balconies, her wild hair fluttering in the warm summer breeze. She looked at him, her face impassive for a long moment. Then a terrible smile broke open her lips.

"Cousin," she said fondly, like they'd ever done more than ignore each other across dinner tables. "I hope you traveled well."

He hadn't. With the difficulty of obtaining a Portkey of late, he'd bought a Muggle plane ticket and spent half a day packed into a seat with several less inches of legroom than he needed. The physical discomfort helped stop him from falling apart over how monstrous he was choosing to become.

Half a day of turning the decision over in his mind, and still he said, "Let's get on with it."

Her welcoming smile slipped away into careful solemnity. "As you wish." She drew back her sleeve and turned her arm to expose the same skull-and-snake he'd seen on Severus's arm, the one that had been found floating above Death Eater attacks as of late. She held a single long finger to it,

the briefest wince of pain flashing through her face.

There was a cracking noise and then a tall, slim figure, impossibly pale, slipped into existence next to Bellatrix. Looking at Voldemort, Sirius felt everything that was ever pleasant inside him die, and he realized how impossibly stupid he'd been to come. This beast would not spare James, and why had Sirius ever thought he would? He wanted to reach into the past and strangle his desperate self of hours earlier. He should run - he should attack -

"Master," Bellatrix said, with a breathless pitch Sirius had never heard her use before. "The Potters' Secret Keeper is here, as I promised."

For half a second, Sirius's hand twitched towards his wand. Voldemort laughed, a cold and cruel sound.

"I thought you wanted to save your friend." His wand came out in a single fluid motion; Sirius's fingertips only brushed against his robes. "If I kill you right here, the Fidelius Charm ends just the same, and I'll have made no promise to let James Potter live."

James's name was a slap across his face. He said, in tones of fear, "The Charm will be over but you won't know where to find them. I'm sure they'll be protected again before you get there."

"Is that why you're here? To lay down your life in a failed attempt at heroics? Have it your way."

Voldemort's wand lifted.

"No," Sirius said hastily, lifting an arm as though he could block the killing curse about to come. "No, I'll tell you where to find them. But you must leave James."

"Of course," Voldemort said, amused. "I have no wish to spill Pure blood, even if it runs within the veins of a fool."

Bellatrix giggled idiotically like a teenager listening to her crush. Sirius's hands fisted with the effort of not sinking to his knees and crumbling under all the fear, guilt, and regret he felt in that moment.

"The Potter family is in Godric's Hollow." Sirius heard his betraying words as if they were coming through a television set: muted, slightly staticky, unreal.

"*Stupefy*," was Voldemort's answer. The last thing he saw before crumpling to the ground was the wide, white gleam of Bellatrix's grin.

When Sirius woke, he was alone on the villa balcony. The Jaipur air was warm even in October; sweat beaded along his brow and slicked through his hair. He noticed the heat first, and then the way he trembled as if naked in a snowdrift.

"I killed Harry," he said to the still, silent night. "I killed Lily." He threw up then, right where he laid, with a heaving force that tore through his chest and throat. "Oh, fuck, I - I killed them all."

He lurched to his knees and then crouched on his feet, struggling to maintain some semblance of sanity in the face of his own actions. Voldemort's cruel leer danced in his vision. He'd made sure that abomination was the last thing his godson would see. The thought sent fresh waves of nausea through him but his stomach was empty now and he only retched.

"I have to - I have to-"

Sirius had thoughts of going to Godric's Hollow, of trying to stop the evil he'd set in motion. He knew it was too late and, worst of all, part of him still hoped what he'd done would save James. If he interfered now, if he even still could, there was no chance of that.

So instead he Apparated back to the Muggle airport, took the long flight home, and arrived back in England in the late hours of Halloween. He Apparated straight to Peter Pettigrew's flat.

"Sirius?" Peter asked when he drew back the door. "Aren't you supposed to be hiding? What's going on?"

"I told the secret," Sirius said, as much as he could bear to admit, and Peter flinched back as his eyes grew wide.

"You what?"

"I had to! He was going to get Harry one way or another, can't you see that? He was going to get us all. This way - this way-"

"You're mad," Peter breathed, terror written across his face.

"I'm not," Sirius said, and drew his wand with a trembling hand. "I just need - I need James. You don't understand. You had parents, you had - well, you always were a bit of a loser but - I'm sorry, I can't tell you how much - but I won't let James find out. If I tell him I made you Secret Keeper, if we switched and you're dead so you can't tell-"

Peter launched himself across the threshold and the two men wrestled on the carpeted landing. Peter's hand closed around Sirius's wrist, and when Sirius jerked back his wand went flying out of his grip. He wriggled his way out from under Peter and managed to land an elbow on Peter's nose as he did. It crunched, Peter howled, and a door down the landing opened.

"Everything alright?" came the slightly shaky voice of an elderly Muggle.

Sirius snatched up his wand and rolled over in time to see Peter, eyes blazing, point his wand and open his mouth.

"*Confringo*," Peter spat. Sirius instinctually shot up a shield charm and the blasting curse deflected. He had just enough time to throw his hands over his head protectively before the beam of light struck the furnace stationed in the hallway.

Behind the charm, Sirius watched, frozen and mute, as the building exploded. Flames roared to life, a section of the ceiling crumbled, and somewhere glass shattered. There were screams - Peter's, the Muggle's, more that he couldn't identify - but not for very long. The flames made quick work of the floor and its occupants.

Sirius huddled under his shield and wondered if he was stuck in a nightmare. When the Aurors showed up, dousing flames and reading charges, he knew he wasn't.

In the face of his own inhumanity, amid the rubble and ash and death, Sirius began to laugh.

November 1982

There was no time in Azkaban.

If there was, he didn't know it.

*I'm sorry, James and Lily. I'm **sorry**, Harry.* Little curly haired boy clutching his thumb, asleep in the crook of his arm. Where did that boy sleep now?

Peter's screams, and he'd always hated Peter anyway. The Muggles' screams.

He screamed, too.

There was no time. There were only Dementors.

Padfoot kept him company, when his mind threatened to break.

Hadn't it broken? Hadn't it?

He didn't think of Severus. He refused to let them eat those memories.

Chapter 13

July 1993

"I did it."

"Yes, James, tea sounds great, thanks."

"And once upon a time, that was true."

"The house elves said so."

"His name is Orion, don't I look like him?"

"Sirius Black!"

Sirius startled at the sound of his name and turned from the face he'd carved into the wall of his cell. He squinted at the man on the other side of his bars. A soft feral growl passed his lips but he made no move to answer.

"You've been holding onto your wits for a while now," the man said. If Sirius knew his name, he couldn't remember it. "Look, here's today's paper. Maybe some news will do your brain good." The man carefully levitated a bundle of folded gray papers through the bars without stepping close enough to be grabbed. They fell onto the dirt floor with a muffled thump. "Not sure why I care," the man muttered as he turned to leave. "You deserve to go mad."

He walked away and Sirius was alone in his cell, his home of the past who-knew-how-many years. Well, he could find out now, couldn't he?

Sirius picked up the dropped paper and carried it to his bed, which he sat upon before unfolding the paper. It took him effort to remember what letters were, and words.

The Daily Prophet, it said at the top. It was several minutes of work to figure that out but reading came easier the more he did it.

Ministry of Magic Employee Scoops Grand Prize, read the largest letters on the page, printed atop a black and white photo of a family. Sirius brushed his fingers over the faces of the strangers. They wore the first smiles he'd seen in - according to the date at the top of the paper -

"Twelve years," he said to the face on the wall and smiled at it. The crude carving smiled back permanently, a child's drawing of a curved line beneath two uneven circles. "Hard to believe, isn't it? I've been here longer than I was at school."

His eyes dipped back down to the photo. His smile froze and shattered.

One of the boys in the picture had a rat perched on his shoulder.

"No..."

Sirius bent closer, as though that would change what he was seeing.

"No!"

He leapt off his bed and began to pace in front of the face on the wall, muttering denials under his breath. He'd seen the flat blow up! He'd heard Peter's agonized screams. Peter could not be alive. It was impossible.

Yet...there he was, in his Animagus form, curled against a schoolboy's neck. He must be truly terrified to be in hiding even while Sirius was imprisoned.

Sirius had accepted his fate early on. It was no less than he deserved. But knowing that Peter was alive woke some long-slumbering part of him. Peter had killed all the Muggles with his idiotic blasting charm, and Peter had spent so many years irritatingly worshipping James, and now Peter was living a quiet life at Hogwarts as a student's pet?

It seemed, in Sirius's damaged brain, entirely unfair. If he was suffering - and he was - then Peter should be too. It was his fault, and Remus's, and Dumbledore's - someone should have realized he would be an incompetent Secret Keeper. Someone should have ended the war sooner. Someone should have stopped him from running to Voldemort.

Sirius hated himself, and he hated everyone, and that included Peter. If he was already serving a punishment for the crime of killing the wizard, he might as well finish the job.

He'd get to go to Hogwarts. He never thought he'd see the castle again. He might see Harry. He might see - the person he didn't think about.

Sirius slept in his cell that night, for the last time

October 1993 - Harry's Third Year

Those first months out of Azkaban, time passed for Sirius like this:

He was a disconcertingly large black dog lumbering out of the churning waters of a dark sea. Once steady on the coast, he shook out his fur, spraying droplets on the tangled foliage around him. He heard a car horn honk somewhere not too far away and the distant laughter of an enjoyable conversation. He felt, still, the cold embrace of the Dementors' devastation.

He blinked, and he sat on the doorstep of a Muggle home, catching scraps tossed by a grinning little boy.

Another breath, and he was trotting down the streets of London at night, head so low it nearly touched the pavement. His breathing was labored from the effort of existing among so many sounds and smells, overwhelming after a decade in solitary confinement. Eventually he ducked into an alley and curled up, nose to tail, trembling.

Slowly, events became less disjointed. The gaps between moments lessened. He remembered whole days at a time, and then he went a week without succumbing to the unending depths of his own mind.

He made it to Hogsmeade and then to Hogwarts. It was shockingly easy to skirt around the patrolling Dementors and duck into Honeydukes, then down the hidden path he'd traveled many times in his youth, before everything scorched to ash. Sirius expected nostalgia to hit him, or grief, or anything at all. Instead he felt nothing as he padded down the stone corridors, a wary nose out for the approaching scent of musky man or filthy cat.

The family in the Prophet photo had been the Weasleys and when he'd first seen it, the name meant nothing to him. Now he recited what he'd recalled about the family - so-called blood traitors, redheads, a long line of Gryffindors - and made his way to the Fat Lady's portrait. He held

a knife between his canine teeth, fetched from the Honeydukes kitchen.

Before the Fat Lady, Sirius turned human for the first time in months. She peered down at him, interest mixing with suspicion.

"When's the last time you had a bath?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Let me in," Sirius answered roughly as he picked up the knife from where it had fallen.

"What's that for?" She edged closer to her frame.

"I need to get in." Sirius spoke slowly, flatly, distracted by how animated she was, so much more alive than the face in the wall, which was the majority of the social contact he'd had in many years. It hurt his eyes to take in the fine details of her expression, like staring at the sun.

"If you don't have the password, I can't help you," she said, a false cheerfulness in her voice.

His breath spun out of control; his chest heaved. Images flooded his mind: sleeping in Azkaban dirt, next to a pile of his own excrement; tattered robes and chilling hisses as Dementors drifted past cell bars; James and Lily dancing at their wedding while he watched with a drink in his hand; the building burning beneath Pettigrew's screams - and all of it, his own fault.

His hand lashed out. The Fat Lady screamed as she disappeared through the frame. Her shrieks grew fainter as she sprinted her way through portraits mounted along the corridor. Sirius barely heard her. He focused on the blade, gleaming in the corridor torchlight as it shredded canvas into strips.

He might have stayed, cutting and cutting and cutting, until he was caught, but a voice broke through his meditative state.

"I don't know, Minerva. She wouldn't calm down."

The words didn't matter; it was the person speaking, and the voice, familiar and painfully strange all at once.

The knife fell from his hand as he froze. It clattered against the stone floor, and the approaching footsteps halted.

"What was that?"

Sirius went back into the safety of Padfoot as the steps resumed at an increasing speed, but he only made it around a corner before he paused.

"Oh my," McGonagall breathed. "Who would have done this?"

Sirius risked pushing his snout past the safety of the wall's cover. Everything inside him tangled up into terrible knots as he looked upon Severus Snape. Severus looked so much older than Sirius remembered him - because, of course, he was. Even still, something about him seemed softer, more human than he'd ever been in his youth.

Swallowing wild dreams of running out and throwing himself at Severus's feet begging for mercy, Sirius turned and carefully picked his way out of the castle without being caught.

For the first time since he'd slipped out of Azkaban, Sirius thought of something besides killing Peter. He remembered his time with Severus, fuzzy and nearly out of touch though the memories

were. After the war was out of his recollection, the times during school were hazy, and so what sprung most vividly forward was the period where they'd been friends before school. Their boyhood companionship had been simple and untainted.

Well, almost. Sirius stepped back into Hogsmeade amid a new rush of memories: a very young Severus, bruises and cuts marking his body, and Sirius nearly helpless in the face of the violence.

Tobias. Had all their problems started there? Maybe in another world where Severus had a loving father, they would've come together under happier circumstances, and everything that followed would have played out far better than it did.

His closest companion, rage, began to bubble up once more, and the familiarity of the feeling called him back to his mission. He was here to kill Peter, to wipe the wizarding world free of the last miserable connection he had to it, and then to kill himself like he'd never been able to do in Azkaban. Severus didn't need to get tangled up in it, or Harry, or Remus.

Sirius returned to the clearing in the woods outside Hogsmeade that he'd been sleeping in, and curled up to rethink his strategy.

November 1993

Sirius crouched in his canine body, tucked between canvas flaps hanging off the spectator stands, shivering from the cold rain that had drenched his fur beyond what he could shake dry. Before him swooped Harry, visible only in a sliver where the flaps slightly parted, and mostly obscured by the rain that blanketed the Quidditch pitch.

Harry drifted out of view, lightning splintered the sky, and a dreadfully familiar despair flooded Sirius.

Not here. he had time to think, protected very slightly by Padfoot subduing his human conscience. Then he was on his feet and scrambling away. He saw quickly that he could not cut through the castle and to Honeydukes; that way, the grounds were flooded with the cloaked terrors. Instead, he loped over muddy grounds and into the Forbidden Forest.

There, the trees protected him from the rain. He walked in circles until the small shards of sky through the trees showed the rain drizzling to a stop, and then he turned back to make his way out of the grounds.

He wanted to regret acting so stupidly for the chance to see Harry, but he didn't. He contained far too many sins and regrets to even begin to lecture himself for that.

A handful of stars dotted the thickly clouded night sky, and somewhere by the lake toads croaked. Sirius thought of Harry flying, and James flying years before him, and the way it would feel to have James's hands choking the life out of him if he was still alive to do it.

What would James do or say, if he had the chance? Sirius didn't believe he'd ever find out, because whatever was waiting for him after death was not what James had earned. Still, he'd constructed so many responses. Justice in the form of killing Sirius was always a feature but sometimes James carried it out in a frothing rage, sometimes with cold detachment, and sometimes with mournful disappointment.

How could you? he'd ask, over and over, as he slashed his wand and cut Sirius to ribbons.

You killed Lily, he'd scream and pummel Sirius until his brains splattered out.

I trusted you, and then there'd be the green flash of the Killing Curse.

No. Even after what Sirius had done, he didn't think James would be capable of an Unforgivable. If anything he'd simply look at Sirius and Sirius would turn the wand on himself, like he planned to soon.

The night was peaceful, the castle familiar. Even with the tumultuous thoughts and the clack of uncut claws against the stone floor, Sirius could almost pretend he was thirteen, sneaking out at night beneath an Invisibility cloak.

June 1994

Months and months and *months* of waiting, and finally Sirius happened upon the boy, standing out on the grounds clutching the rat like he'd been placed for Sirius's pleasure.

There was not enough humanity left inside him to care about the crack of the boy's bone as Sirius dragged him under the Whomping Willow and further, down the dirt path he'd walked so many times, the same one he'd sent Severus along hoping for his death. Well, now there was another death on his mind.

Sirius tossed the Weasley onto the bed. A cloud of dust puffed out around him and settled in his overgrown red hair.

"What do you want?" he asked in a low, fearful tone. He clutched Pettigrew to his chest even as the idiotic coward tried to scratch his way free.

Sirius slipped back into his human body, and moments later heard the sound of the trapdoor swinging open. He growled as he moved to guard the boy. Harry and a girl climbed into the Shack, looking like they could be brother and sister with their matching brown skin and dark curls.

Sirius wanted to stare at Harry for hours, to pick out all the features he'd borrowed from James. He wanted to tell him stories that would make him laugh, and listen to tales he didn't deserve to hear.

But he'd killed Harry's father. So he only turned away and hovered closer to Pettigrew, reaching slowly in hopes the Weasley would be fearful enough to let Sirius pry the rat out from his grip.

"Sirius Black," he moaned. "Harry, get away, it was a trap."

The words buzzed around the shack, grating against Sirius's tenuous hold on something passing for sanity.

"Give him to me," he snarled, and lunged.

Despite his injured leg, the Weasley curled protectively around his pet, eyes flaring open. "What d'you want with Scabbers?"

"With who?" Sirius asked, distracted.

"My rat," Weasley said. "His name is Scabbers."

"No." Sirius shook his head, which made him dizzy. He wasn't sure the last time he'd eaten - days, at least. "That's Peter Pettigrew."

"Peter's dead," said the girl quietly, edging closer to Harry. "He died in the fire you set."

"He did not, clearly." Sirius pointed. "I didn't set it either, Peter did and that's Peter. We were Animagi - could turn into animals - James and Peter and me. Your dad was a stag, I was a dog, and Peter a rat."

All three children turned to look at the rat shredding the Weasley's hands to bloody ribbons but before another word was said, a thin figure rose through the door.

Remus looked awful, old and gray, with dim eyes that barely sparked even as they looked upon a murderer.

Sirius looked at Remus, and Remus looked back, and for a moment all the long-held plans of killing Pettigrew slipped away. He couldn't remember why he'd wanted to in the first place. He was the killer, the traitor, the piece of shit, the one-

Sirius fell to his knees, and bowed his head.

"Remus," he murmured. "You're here."

"As, unfortunately, are you." When Sirius lifted his gaze again, Remus's wand was centered between his eyes.

It would be so easy. His tongue traced his lower lip and tasted the confession. *I betrayed them.* Remus would kill him right there on the dusty, rotted floor on which they'd spent so many moonlit nights.

He already knew, and yet he hadn't cast a thing. He only stared down at Sirius with a distant, unfocused look.

"Why?" Remus asked eventually.

Sirius looked from him to the children pressed to the edges of the room, terrified and wild-eyed. Pettigrew had yet to cease his frantic squeaking. It was a tiny room of hell of his own creation.

"I-" Sirius began, words falling roughly from a dry mouth, and the trapdoor flung open once more.

It was Severus, thin, long-haired, impossibly aged as he had been on Halloween, and still Sirius wanted to wrap him in his arms. Sirius was on his feet before he'd given it a thought. All eyes swung to Severus, bearing a goblet and fixing a piercing gaze onto Remus.

The small bubble of anticipation popped. Of course. After all this time, they'd run back to each other, hadn't they? Sirius had only ever been the falling rising action in the love story of Severus and Remus, hadn't he?

It was like he'd forgotten what anger felt like, the way it flooded through him in a heat that nearly burned, the way his cheeks flamed and his heart burst to life in his throat.

He'd wanted to kill Peter, but that had been a divine mission to cleanse the world, one final act of atonement. He'd forgotten how consuming it felt to want to kill Severus.

Severus passed the goblet to Remus, who drained it.

"I shouldn't be surprised you'd be here, Snape. Always sticking your big nose where it didn't belong," said Sirius, harsh and bitter. He couldn't help but think of the other things he was sticking

where he shouldn't.

Severus barely spared him a curled lip before turning to the children. It was, apparently, a full moon, and Remus was due to turn any moment. Severus ushered them out of the Shrieking Shack, leaving Remus safely locked up behind them, and only back in the dirt tunnel did Sirius remember what he'd wanted to do.

Truthfully, the plan had lost most of its appeal. He was tired, hungry, and cold. He was ready to die before the Dementors could get him, or before things could complicate even further. He didn't want Harry to see it happen. Maybe he could convince Severus to send the children away and do it right then.

"Let's see Peter now," Sirius said, and wondered why he was bothering to continue the farce.

"Peter?" Severus asked. "That's Ron Weasley."

"Not this again," Sirius snapped and turned to glare at Severus. Their eyes met for the first time and it was like waking in a room with the curtains drawn. Sirius saw, so easily, that Severus wanted him as badly as he ever had, that he'd been missed - maybe he'd turned to Remus out of loneliness but Sirius was who he wanted, even after all these years.

A plan, laced with guilt and improbability, began to form while the girl and Harry filled Severus in.

Severus drew his wand. One Form Reversal spell later, Peter Pettigrew crouched on the floor.

"Finally," Sirius said triumphantly. Everything was falling into place now. He'd made a mistake, and he'd suffered for it. He hadn't *actually* killed anyone, not like Peter who fired off a Blasting curse indoors. That had to be much closer to murder than simply sharing an address.

"Don't let him do it," Peter cried from where he cowered on the floor. "He'll kill me, like he tried to do all those years ago. I didn't do it, I swear. I'm not a Death Eater. It's him!"

If they'd been alone, Sirius would have kicked him. As it was, he looked to Severus, who stunned Peter and then levitated him without a second thought.

He believed Sirius. Of course he did. He'd been told the truth, after all. Sirius hadn't said Peter was the Secret Keeper. They were jumping to conclusions. That was not Sirius's fault at all.

Goosebumps rippled across Sirius's arms as they stepped out into the chilly night, but he paid them no mind. He was seeing, for the first time, a chance to live outside the walls of Azkaban. Death seemed a lot less appealing beneath twinkling stars, next to a boy that looked like James, sending him shyly curious glances.

Of course, Peter would not be Stunned forever. He'd have memories and Veritaserum on his side, if the Ministry bothered to give it. Had they picked up the habit of holding trials since he'd been jailed, or would they toss him to rot without evidence like they had Sirius?

"Sirius?" Harry's voice was tentative as grass swished beneath their feet. "Are you...okay?"

Sirius watched Severus's head half-turn back towards them.

"Getting there," Sirius said, rubbing his cold forearms. "Have you heard about me? Did you know me and your dad-" He couldn't finish the sentence. An ice pick of guilt slammed into his rib cage, and he fell silent from the shock of it.

"You were best friends, yeah, I...found out." Harry's smile was shifty as he nodded at his friends. "This is Hermione and Ron."

"You're all in Gryffindor?" A trio of nods. "Well, I suppose once this is all sorted I can find somewhere to live, and maybe you three can visit this summer. Any good at Quidditch? We could play."

Harry grinned then, an unselfconscious expression that lit up his whole face.

"A bit, yeah."

As they neared the castle, Hermione drew her robes tighter around her and shivered.

"I could smash some tea," Ron said, watching her, and Harry nodded.

"Why's it so bloody cold in June?" Sirius asked.

Before the words were fully out of his mouth, Severus whirled around. "Dementors!"

Panicked, Sirius whirled around, and there, hundreds of meters away, hovered an impending cloud of the nightmarish creatures.

"Harry," Severus continued urgently, "Lupin's told me you can cast a corporeal Patronus, is that true?"

Harry nodded, they both drew their wands, and Sirius looked at Hermione and Ron.

"I can too," he said and put out his hand. Ron, very reluctantly, passed over his wand, and if there weren't a herd of Dementors heading their way, Sirius could have spent hours marveling at the feeling of magic at his touch once again.

Around them, the cold blanketed, a feeling familiar and wretched, like the last time he'd walked into Grimmauld Place after his brother's death.

He was far from immune to the Dementors but there was a certain acquired resistance. Though his heart stuttered and his lungs threatened collapse, his mind was clear. After a few precious seconds of casting around for something suitable, he dredged forth a memory of the single winter holiday he'd spent with Severus, of an afternoon strolling Hogsmeade and kissing in the snow.

His eyes flicked to Severus but the man was fixed on the approaching doom.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Three silvery animals burst forth from their wands and charged forth, their glow illuminating Peter's prone form where Severus had dropped him in his haste to conjure a Patronus.

Sirius looked at him and then back to Severus and Harry as they cast their spells once more, an idea forming.

"There's too many," Sirius said. He was impressed with how steady his voice held, and with the fact that there was apparently no amount of evil he wouldn't commit to get what he wanted. "We need to run for the castle. We should make it." A deep breath - *please let Severus buy this*. "We have to leave him. Levitation won't work at that speed."

Horror and despair flickered across all the children's faces, and Severus's too in much more muted tones.

"He's the proof of your innocence. I can carry him, I'll-"

"There's no time to argue," Sirius interrupted, which was true. The Dementors were drifting across the lake. "We already have to help Ron."

They looked at each other, wasting time, until Severus tightened his jaw and said, "Fine."

Things moved quickly after that. He and Severus positioned Ron between them and the group sprinted back toward the castle, leaving Pettigrew's prone form behind. As Harry yanked open the castle door, Pettigrew's scream ripped through the otherwise silent grounds.

It was a sound that had featured in many of Sirius's - dreams? Nightmares? Dementor visions? - over his imprisonment, and it was enough to twist something inside him, perhaps a long-ignored shred of humanity.

But it was overpowered by the feeling of triumph that flooded him. Peter no longer had a story to tell. What Sirius said would be the only testimony, and his original plan all those years ago to shift the blame to Peter would come to fruition.

Just as quickly, the warmth extinguished. James was dead, Peter was Kissed, and Severus and Remus were back together again - and all of it, because he'd been a weak, cowardly worm. He'd spent years suffering alone, and now he'd have to play the part of an innocent wronged victim, which felt like it would be its own form of suffering.

Sirius was in a thoroughly bad mood by the time they dropped the children off at the hospital wing. When Severus directed him to the headmaster, he only swept his hands out and said, "After you, *Professor*."

Chapter 14

July 1994

Sirius didn't remember hiding the box that he slid out from his childhood bed at Jaipur but when he lifted the lid, each item he extracted sparked a memory - James, passing him the snitch in the locker rooms; Severus, handing him chocolate in Hogsmeade; Peter, turning his trunk inside out looking for the pheasant quill from his nan.

Sirius dropped the items back and pulled out a sheet of folded parchment from the top of a stack. He read the letter from Bellatrix once, twice, and tried for a third, but could no longer see past the tears collecting in his eyes.

They fell eventually, splattering across the cruelly penned words, and Sirius swiped at his face furiously. He didn't deserve to cry, and he'd sworn he wouldn't. He'd accept his death gracefully - he'd burn this box, throw himself off a balcony, and his memory would live on without the weight of the evil he'd committed.

The tears continued, unhindered by his pledge to stoicism.

He shoved everything back into the box and under the bed in a blind fury, and moved out of his room to the grand halls. He saw Voldemort's face around each corner, a whisper of the last time he'd been in the villa.

Sirius rounded a turn and there *was* someone before him but instead of a pale snake it was a tall, slender woman that for a few seconds he took for a hallucination of Bellatrix.

Then he noticed the thin scar across her upper lip, and the genuine warmth in her eyes, and the cautious smile that crossed her lips.

"Sirius," she said, and drew him to her in a hug. The embrace felt oppressive and overwhelming; it was more physical contact than he'd had in longer than the Dementors allowed him to remember. But he held himself still in her touch, recognizing it was the last one he would feel, and thinking it could be one final kindness to his cousin.

"Andie," he said, and couldn't quite force a smile.

"I'm so sorry, I've lost my head. While you were - well, you know - the villa passed to us, but of course it's yours now. We'll get a Portkey back home as soon as we can."

"No." Sirius squirmed under her studious gaze as she held him at arm's length. "I don't mind."

"Have you been crying?" she asked and took his chin in one hand. He tugged away then and slipped just out of her reach.

"No."

"Yes, you have," she insisted and brushed her fingers across her own cheeks. "I can tell. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Sirius laughed, a desperate and hysterical explosion. "I - I can't even tell you, that's what's wrong, how horrible it is."

The polite friendliness drifted from her face and left in its place an expression of calculating regard.

"So what?"

"So what? So, I've hurt people, a lot of people. I've done awful, awful things."

"No." She shook her head. "I mean, so what now? Are you going to kill yourself, is that what you're thinking? That you're totally unredeemable?"

"I am," Sirius said, and thought of James and Lily, and orphaned Harry, and Severus taking his verbal abuse in the headmaster's office the night he'd let Peter get Kissed.

"What if you just...don't?" Her hand moved as though to touch him but instead dropped to her side. "What if you focus on what you can do now?"

"I don't deserve to."

"I don't believe that."

They stood in the oversized halls, regarding each other with similarly sculpted jaws, identical dark brown eyes, and thick hair that fell in the same shade across their shoulders.

"So what now?" Andromeda repeated when Sirius said nothing else. "Now you can give whatever you did meaning. You can't remove the past, but you can alter the future."

"What do you mean?"

"If you die now, all you ever did is harm. If you keep going, you can create opportunities for good. You have money, time, power. What can you do with all that privilege?"

Sirius didn't answer; there was not much more to say. Andromeda hugged him and he went back to his childhood room and collected his box of things. With the box hefted under his arm, he picked up the international return Portkey he hadn't expected to use, and held it until it activated at noon.

His feet barely touched ground when he turned on his heel and Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

How many times had he wandered these streets, sullen, distressed, furious, grieving? It had all been useless emotion. He could barely remember those small things that used to bother him.

The house was dusty, empty since his mother's death. Kreacher shuffled down the stairs and when he spotted Sirius, he began to howl, piteous cries that sent him to the floor, pounding his fists and sobbing.

"How did the nasty traitor survive," Kreacher moaned to himself, "when mistress and masters were so much more worthy yet did not?"

"I don't know about more worthy," Sirius said, disturbed by his own desire to stomp on Kreacher and stifle his cries.

With that impulse came a realization. Andie had too much faith in him. He wasn't ever going to be the person that did the right thing. The best thing he'd done, fight for the war, had simply been another move in the twisted chess game he played with Severus.

Severus. The one constant in his life, and only because he kept running back every time Sirius stabbed him in the back. If he was a good person, if he ever hoped to make anything of this shitty life, he should leave Severus in peace. He should flee his wretched childhood home, quit the wizarding world. He could spend his days atoning with the monks. He could shave his head and wear a different kind of robe, swear off meat and meditate and take care of people.

He could.

Instead he went upstairs, shoved his box of mementos in the back of his wardrobe, and sat down to write Severus a letter.

August 1994

Severus stepped into Grimmauld Place looking absolutely miserable, and Sirius knew he'd been right. Severus would never give up on him, not ever. Even when he said he wasn't interested, even when he looked at Sirius like his heart was broken, Sirius knew how he really felt.

He wasn't going to make it easy for him, though. If he changed too quickly, Severus would get suspicious, or maybe he simply needed the challenge. Whatever it was, when Sirius pulled Severus into his bed, he pinned him down by his wrists and whispered harsh words into his ears and didn't kiss him even though his lips ached for the contact. Then he sent Severus on his way and stared at the door when it closed behind him, wondering when they'd have their next shot to really be together.

Sirius felt wound up when he was alone, and Kreacher didn't count as company. He tried to get back into the yoga practice Severus interrupted but his concentration was broken and his body demanded something more physical. So he stepped out into the street, barefoot and shirtless, in only a pair of thin cotton trousers, and set off walking.

He didn't think he had a destination in mind, but when he walked up the paved path to the Snape front door, he realized he had, the whole time. It was only after he knocked that he remembered he'd left his wand back on the coffee table. When the door swung open and Tobias lurched forward, thin and bleary-eyed and stinking of booze, he knew it didn't matter.

Severus's father came apart under his hands. He felt his cheekbone crush his eye socket, the cartilage in his nose sink back into his skull, the teeth inside his mouth shatter. He kept breaking and breaking long after Tobias stopped struggling. His own hands were useless when he was done, the thin fragile bones in his fingers crushed beneath his torn skin. He left Tobias's body in a pool of blood inside the doorway and stumbled back home. He healed his fingers, his knuckles, the defensive scratches on his arm, the bite mark on his thigh.

He'd sworn to Severus that one day, he'd do everything to Tobias that had been done to him. He hadn't bothered with the belt, or the clothes hanger, or the stovetop. But he'd done enough. For the first time in his life, Sirius felt like he'd done something good.

February 1995

Hogsmeade looked remarkably the same as it had in his own school days. He and Remus walked with Harry and his friends, and he saw his ruined childhood everywhere. There was the street he'd stalked Severus down in a fit of jealousy, before he'd even known what he was feeling or why. There was the tree he'd enchanted to reach down and smack a branch into the back of Peter's head. There was the gift shop he'd stolen the snow globe and chocolate from. There was the alley he and James ducked into when they were falling over drunk and McGonagall was about to walk by.

None of it hurt the way it should. He hadn't felt much since that night on the doorstep in Spinner's End. It was like he'd used up all his rage and grief and guilt on smashing the life out of Tobias.

Eventually they wandered into the Three Broomsticks and squeezed themselves into a booth. Remus ordered a round of Butterbeers, with a pointed look that showed he meant Sirius to pay for it.

Their drinks were half-gone, a warm buzz permeating the group, when Harry lifted his arm and called, "Professor Snape!"

Sirius turned, and there he was. Severus moved smoothly through the crowded room; students parted before him, looking apprehensive to stand in his way. He glanced at Remus and saw Remus already staring at him, frowning.

Was there something about his face? Could he tell Sirius was in love?

"Did you need something, Mr. Potter?" Severus snarled and Sirius flicked his attention over to him, surprised at the rancor in his voice.

Harry looked equally taken aback as he said, "Er, just wanted to say hi."

"You've said it."

"Don't be rude," Remus admonished, which made Sirius kick his calf under the table.

Severus's lip curled into an impolite sneer, and he looked ready to spit a great many insults, so Sirius spoke before he could. "You should join us, Severus."

The children and Remus whipped their heads around to gawk at him. Severus remained disdainful.

"As thrilling as I'm sure your company would be, I'm working."

"It's Valentine's Day," Sirius said, hoping he sounded inviting. "Surely you-"

"I can't." Severus took a step back. "Mr. Weasley, don't forget you have detention tonight for intentionally exploding your cauldron on Mr. Malfoy."

Then he was gone in a flourish of black robe. Sirius remained in the booth for a moment, conflicted about how obvious his behavior would become. Quickly he gave up on subtlety.

"I'll be right back," he said and shuffled his way off the bench.

He found Severus storming down the cobblestone road. Sirius caught him by the elbow and he spun around, a fierce glare on his face as he snapped, "I really am working."

This is what we've done to you, Sirius thought, remembering the eager but sensitive little boy he'd met in the park. *Your father, me, everyone at school. We hurt you this badly.*

He'd killed James and Lily and Peter, but somehow the fury on Severus's face was the only thing hurting him anymore.

"I'll walk with you," Sirius said and swept out a hand. He was delighted when Severus took off walking at a much slower pace, allowing Sirius to fall into step beside him.

"Were you and Lupin enjoying your date?" Severus sniped as they turned the corner by the post office.

"Yes, thank you. I thought since you fucked him, I should have a go too." Sirius couldn't resist ribbing him. He made it too easy.

Severus asked in a low voice, "Did you really?"

They stopped by the Shrieking Shack. Sirius thought of the night he'd sent Severus to die there, and wondered if Severus was thinking of it too. Perhaps this was not the right backdrop for a confession of love...but it had been far too long since he'd held Severus in his arms. He didn't want to wait anymore.

"What if I did?"

"I might kill you." Sirius already knew he was evil, but the pleasure he felt at Severus's feral words confirmed it.

"Then we'll both be relieved that I didn't." Sirius looked over Severus's shoulder, off into the forest, as he added, "I don't hate you, you know. Like I said before. I hate what happened."

"Mm. I don't blame you. I hate it too."

"But you love me." Sirius met his gaze now, his heart pounding, willing him not to disagree. "You always have."

"Pathetically, as you've said."

"That was a long time ago. When I really did despise you." All those years they'd wasted fighting over stupid things. Sirius had said so much he hadn't meant.

"And now?" Severus asked, like he didn't really want to know the answer.

"I'm obsessed with you," Sirius said, because it was true. They hadn't seen each other in six months, and he'd thought of Severus and the moment they'd reunite every day. It was the best, worst kind of pain. And he planned to give in to it.

He stepped forward, and warmed at the way Severus's eyes dipped to his lips. Of course he would surrender to Sirius's mouth. They were destined to be here, among the ghosts of their childhood, sealing their fate with a kiss.

Chapter 15

October 1997 - Harry's Seventh Year

Most of the time, Sirius believed his own lies.

He became the innocent man he wished he was: a survivor of an undeserved prison sentence, a byproduct of a flawed justice system, a caring godfather making up for lost time, a scarred but repentant friend.

Sometimes, when Severus was away at Hogwarts and he was alone in Grimmauld Place with its dark hallways and despairing shadows, he'd pull out the box he should've destroyed long ago, and flip through the artifacts of the truth. Letters, stolen trophies, sentimental trinkets, evidence of a man that should've thrown himself off the sandstone villa when he'd had the chance.

He'd sleep eventually and when he woke, beneath soft blankets, with the curtains drawn, balancing breakfast on his lap, counting down the days til he saw Severus again, he buried the version of him that deserved to die and turned back to the one he wished he was.

Sirius watched as Harry defeated Voldemort and then, once the dust settled, used him as a champion for Azkaban reforms. He went to press reports and meetings with the Ministry, mediated by the lawyer Severus had used to try and contact him during his prison sentence. He took photos and shook hands and tried to explain how he hadn't gone insane after so long in close proximity to Dementors.

"I think because I knew I was innocent," he said, over and over, to flashing bulbs and sympathetic smiles and soothing pats on the arm.

He wasn't innocent. He was insane. Bred that way, born into it, the darkness of the Black blood that ran through him. He wished his singed name on the tapestry would've broken the curse.

He wished the best moment of his life hadn't been turning a Muggle's bones to dust.

It was better when Severus was around. They hung around the grocer he'd worked for as a teenager. They ate sandwiches and drank tea. They talked and held hands and when they fucked, it was more like making love, and Sirius even liked it that way, feeling Severus warm and whole against him. They travelled, when they could, and curled up on the sofa when they couldn't. They never ran out of things to say. Sirius never wanted him to leave.

It was unfortunate that the job of a Hogwarts professor was one that made him leave so often. Severus came through the fireplace regularly, but it wasn't the same with the press of work bearing down on him, setting them a quick hour to fit a day's affection.

It had been two days since Severus's last firecall, so Sirius was in a rather sour mood as he banged around Grimmauld Place. He'd thought about moving so many times, but in the end it never

seemed right. The house was like him; he was like the house. Dark, depressed, built by pain and oppression and shame.

Kreacher prowled into the sitting room and Sirius grouched, without looking up, "Go away. I'm not hungry."

"I'm afraid I'm not here for that." Sirius snapped to attention as he recognized Albus Dumbledore's voice. For one heartstopping moment, he thought the grave look on his face meant they'd found out about him, and sent the most powerful wizard alive to take care of him. He glanced at his wand, uselessly resting on the console table across the room, and then back at Dumbledore.

"How can I help you?" His casually warm voice didn't falter. He'd gotten good at pretending.

"Severus collapsed in his quarters last night," Dumbledore said with the practiced gentleness of someone who'd delivered hundreds of death announcements. "He was found this morning when he didn't report to his classes. He's at St. Mungo's now."

Sirius felt his world split like a physical shock, the moment before he heard the news and after.

"Collapsed?" he repeated. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know any more than that. I can bring you to the hospital if you'd like."

Half an hour later, Sirius sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair pushed up against a hospital bed. He held Severus's hand, the contrast between pale and dark stronger than ever. Glowing orbs hovered around Severus, monitoring his heart and oxygen levels, dosing him with restorative potions that had no effect.

Wizards didn't collapse. Severus didn't collapse. If it had been a simple physical ailment, a heart attack or aneurism or blood clot, they would've fixed him by now.

"Spell damage," the Healer confirmed an hour later, consulting a sheet of parchment. She spoke brusquely, one eye on the clock above the door. "Only we have no idea the spell or the caster. All the damage is in his brain, but that doesn't narrow the possibilities much. We are cooperating with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and we will do everything we can for your loved one."

"Severus," Sirius said, smoothing down his hair where it fell across the pillow. "You should say his name."

"Yes, of course. For Severus." She gave him a tight smile and left.

December 1997

"Happy Christmas," Sirius said quietly as he sat down and took Severus's hand, his usual position after all these months.

He'd been moved to permanent spell damage even after Hermione Granger's vigorous protests. She insisted you couldn't call a symptom permanent when you didn't know the cause. Her fire flamed Ron and Harry. They'd refused to decorate Severus's long-term room and still talked and read to him at each visit.

Sirius didn't bother. He knew Severus was never waking up. He knew it was his punishment to see

his redemption waste away in front of him. So he still visited, but he expended as little energy as possible. He needed it when he was alone in Grimmauld Place, refusing to entertain the voices in his brain that demanded he finally, finally kill himself. It was too late for that. Now it would only be the easy way out.

Perhaps an hour passed before Severus's mediwizard came in. She carried two brightly wrapped packages and held them both out to Sirius with a cheery grin.

"Happy Christmas!" she chirped, and shook the gifts a little when he didn't take them. "Go on! One for each of you."

Sirius waited until she was gone to peel off the paper. Each box contained a small package of chocolates. He unwrapped one and had just taken a bite when someone else entered the room. It was a man Sirius had never seen before, wearing plain gray robes and a friendly smile that seemed more genuine than all the ones the healers pasted on.

"Ah, Sirius Black, isn't it?" he said, offering his hand. Sirius shook it slowly. "Perfect timing. I've been trying to catch you here. You haven't answered my letters."

That was because there was an unsorted stack sprawled across the kitchen table, containing every letter he'd received since Severus's admittance. He didn't tell the man that. He only looked at him, waiting for him to make his point.

"I'm the auror assigned to Mr. Snape's case," he explained. "Benjamin Crowley, how do you do?"

Sirius looked back to Severus and gripped his hand tighter.

"Ah, right, right. Stupid of me. I'm sorry. Do you have a minute to answer some of my questions?"

Sirius shrugged. Crowley dragged the other visitor's chair up against the bed and sat so they faced each other, Severus comatose between them.

"What do you know about Mr. Snape visiting your cousin Bellatrix Lestrangle in Azkaban?"

Sirius blinked. "He...what?"

Crowley reached into his robes and pulled out two folded sheets of parchment, which he handed over. Sirius opened the first and found a letter to Bellatrix from Severus's lawyer requesting a visit. The second was an agreement to the visit, penned by a guard.

"We keep records of all transmissions in and out of the prison. It's such a new system, there's not many, so these were easy to find." Crowley watched him intently with eyes that had gotten a lot less friendly. "You knew nothing of this?"

"No, no - I-" Sirius read Severus's letter again. "I had no idea. Can I keep these?" It was an impulse, the old itch from his childhood, surfacing for the first time in a long while.

Crowley waved his hands permissively. "Go ahead. Those are copies." As Sirius tucked them away, he continued. "We'll be interviewing Lestrangle soon. Just trying to gather all the facts first. It's the only scrap of information we've gotten about this attack." He seemed to hesitate and then leaned forward, dropping his voice. "Why would Mr. Snape, a Death Eater, visit any of his former comrades?"

The question was infuriating. Sirius had done a pretty good job of handling his temper when he'd had Severus to think of. Now there was nothing holding him back.

"He wasn't a Death Eater," Sirius snarled. "He was a spy, you fucking moron. How are you investigating his case if you don't know the first thing about him?"

Crowley leaned back, and Sirius's flare of rage cooled as he realized the auror looked satisfied by his reaction.

"I just thought," Crowley said as he stood, "a war hero would stay away from the people he helped imprison. And yet." He rubbed his chin as he looked down at Sirius. "How did you two meet, by the way? Was it before or after you, yourself, went to Azkaban for supporting Voldemort?"

It was only Severus's body between them that stopped Sirius from launching himself at the auror, and even still he considered going around him and doing it anyway. That smirk, those smug eyes. The fucker didn't know anything. He was only fishing.

Sirius watched Crowley stroll out of the room. Then he kissed Severus on the forehead and went straight home to call their lawyer.

January 1998

The first time Sirius was brought to Azkaban, it was in shackles, hunched in a tiny boat as rain poured down on him and the aurors refused to cast any charms on him to help. He'd been shivering and cold and numb, inside and out, by the time they dragged him through the stone halls and tossed him into his cell. He'd sat in those wet clothes for a week before they'd cared to hand him new ones.

The second time, he sat comfortably in a waterproof cloak, sliding a finger along his wand. Anu Patel perched opposite him. The sky was gray and cloudy but a storm didn't seem a real possibility.

He tried to commit every detail to memory: the weathered wood beneath his legs, the softness of his cloak, the misty spray of the ocean as they crested waves, the sharp unique scent of salty water and marine life.

The first time he left Azkaban it was as a dog swimming through the churning waters.

There would be no second time.

"There it is," Anu said unnecessarily with a nod toward the massive castle that had seemingly appeared out of thin air. "Are you sure you're okay to do this?"

"I'm fine," Sirius said, and he was. He was fine walking through the entrance, down the corridors, past the cell that had once been his, and into the visitor's room. It was only when they dragged Bellatrix in and dropped her in the chained chair that he lost his nerve, and that was because she was filthy and crazed. He knew he was looking at his own future.

"Baby cousin," she crooned once they were alone. "What a pleasant surprise. First your lover, now you. I *am* still quite the socialite, aren't I?"

"Why did he visit you?"

Bellatrix's laugh took up the whole room. "Come now. They can't listen to us. Potter worked his magic. We have *rights* now. There's no need to be coy."

Sirius looked away. "I don't know what you mean."

"Why, the little Mudblood came to ask me about you, of course!" Her smile was full of teeth and madness. "He found a letter, you see, and he was very sad." She pouted as she dropped into a baby voice. "He couldn't believe the sweet little Muggle-lover sold out his best friend."

It took Sirius a very long time to understand what she said, and when he did he could still barely process it. He'd thought Severus was a victim of a Death Eater attack, but -

No. He'd found the letter. Sirius had shoved his box in his wardrobe and never charmed it, because no one went into his bedroom. Except Severus. Severus must have found it, must have come to Bellatrix hoping he'd misunderstood, must have -

Had he hurt himself? Had the knowledge been so horrible that he'd chosen death over living with it?

But if that was the case, why was he stuck in a vegetative state? Morbid though it was, wouldn't Severus know how to kill himself efficiently?

He didn't have the full picture. But he had enough. The plan that had brought him to Azkaban would still proceed. Bellatrix had been involved in everything - Sirius's betrayal, Severus's injury. She'd killed and she'd stuck her nose where it didn't belong. And Sirius was ready to take responsibility for his actions, but he was going to make it all worth his while.

So he shook out the knife he'd hidden in his sleeve and plunged it into Bellatrix's neck, again and again, through her guttural chokes, and the blood trickling out of her mouth and nose, through her eyes going glassy and fixed.

When he was done, there was blood on the walls, on his arm, on his face and in his hair. It was messy. Tobias had taught him he liked messy.

Still, he used his wand to clean himself. Azkaban had been reformed but he wasn't going to risk being stuck in blood-soaked robes for a week.

He dropped his wand onto the table and looked at Bellatrix's slumped form as he called loudly, "I've killed Bellatrix. I'm unarmed. I surrender."

August 1998

Azkaban was not like it had been. There were no Dementors freezing any sliver of rational thought. There was an actual toilet in the corner of the cell and the bed had a surprisingly comfortable mattress. He was given books and parchment and quills, though they seemed to be encased in an invisible bubble that made them impossible to hold. They worked only by dictation. Twice a day he was brought somewhere outside, at the top of a parapet or to a dirt-packed courtyard. He would bend through a sun salutation or walk small loops.

The guards liked him for ridding them of Bellatrix. They would pass him little packages of sweets, loose cigarettes, tiny bottles containing single shots of alcohol. They would talk to him, too, fill him in on the world and laugh at his trivial commentary, which he made more out of habit than anything.

After a while, they started bringing small groups of prisoners together, three or four at a time. Sirius was sure he shouldn't have been allowed to go since he'd killed someone under their care already. He was very careful to be quiet and polite to avoid losing the privilege. He didn't care

what the person opposite him had done. He'd done worse, and he needed human contact too badly to be selective.

He didn't owe anyone and no one owed him. He'd expected that. He'd stolen years of friendship from them and he had no right to any more.

One morning, the guards led him in a direction he'd never been.

"Did they decide on execution, after all?" Sirius asked.

"You have a visitor."

Sirius wanted to ask who but the words wouldn't come. He found out soon enough anyway.

Severus sat at a table, opposite a chair draped with chains. He was as deathly pale as he'd been in St. Mungo's but his eyes were alert. They instantly fastened onto Sirius.

"Does he have to be chained?" Severus asked the guards without looking away.

"The chains respond to the prisoner," one guard explained. "If he's docile, they will be too."

Docile.

Sirius sat down. The chains didn't stir. The guards left.

"When did you wake up?" Sirius asked, voice hoarse from the effort it took to speak. Severus looked so weak, but so beautiful. He curled his hands into fists to fight the urge to reach out and touch him.

"March. I wasn't released from St. Mungo's until May. It turns out that self-Obliviation is not ideal."

"Is that what you did?" Sirius heard the shock in his own words. "Because - because of me?"

Severus nodded. "I wanted to be with you." He looked over the stone walls carefully. "I think you figured out the one situation where it couldn't happen. Even after everything, I think I'd take you back if I could."

"You can," Sirius said, though he knew it was foolish and he didn't even deserve to say it. "We could have visits like these. We could write to each other."

"We could," Severus said gently, and took his hand. "We won't."

Sirius looked at their joined hands through eyes blurred by tears. "Why haven't you told anyone that I killed James and Lily?"

"Anu thinks you'll get twenty years for killing Bellatrix." Severus reached out and thumbed a few fallen tears away. "Twenty years isn't the rest of your life. Hell, fifty's not even middle aged for a Pureblood, is it? With all the reforms, you can work on yourself in here, and still have a good life after."

"What about you?"

"With the cane, I can move well enough to teach again. I think I'll just keep doing that. It keeps me busy, and I'm never alone for long."

Sirius looked him over. He wished they could stay in that room forever, and he also wished Severus had never come.

"I won't work on myself," he said. "I'm a bad person, Severus. Deep inside, where I can't fix it. I killed Tobias, you know. I beat him to death with my hands. I stabbed Bellatrix. I enjoyed it. Lily, James, Peter, those Muggles. You. I've ruined enough lives. I think you should tell someone. Show them the letter. Put me away for good."

Severus squeezed the hand he was still holding. "I can't do that," he whispered. "I need something to hope for."

"After what I just said? After everything I've done?"

"Always."

Sirius looked around at the room in which he'd killed Bellatrix. The stones gleamed like there'd never been blood splashed across them. He looked back at Severus, the boy he'd hurt so many times, and at the man who hid all of the scars.

"Don't forgive me," he begged. "I mean it, Severus. Hate me. Report me. Lock me up forever. I need you to want better for yourself."

"It's too late," Severus said and lifted his hand to kiss the back of it. His eyes were wet too now. "I already have."

They stayed in the room until the guards came to send Severus home. Sirius went back to his cell. He laid in the bed that was too good for him and stared out the newly-charmed window. Twenty years in this cell, while the world moved on without him.

He turned onto his side. Twenty years. It was a long time. He was sure it wasn't long enough.

**“Sirius and Severus grow
up together” AU**

**“He looked back at
Severus and for the first
time that funny feeling
thrummed through him
looking not at an object
but a person. He wanted,
suddenly and
desperately, to be
Severus’s friend. It would
be the best thing he’d
ever pull over on his
parents.”**